



Towards a geopolitics of atheism: Critical geopolitics post the ‘War on Terror’



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ABSTRACT

Political geography has an established tradition of engaging with religiously-driven *geopolitik*. However, despite the remarkable growth in professed atheist beliefs in recent decades and the popular expression of an imagined geopolitical binary between secular/atheist and religious societies, the geopolitics of irreligion have received almost no attention among academic practitioners. This paper outlines the core tenets of ‘New Atheist’ philosophy, before addressing how its key representatives have taken positions on the ‘Global War on Terror.’ In particular, we critically interrogate the works of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens and identify a belligerent geopolitical imagination which posits a civilizational clash between an existentially-threatened secular, liberal West with responsibility to use extraordinary violence to protect itself and the world from a backwards oriental Islam. The paper concludes with four possible explanations for the paradox that the New Atheist critique of religion for being violent acts itself as a geopolitical incitement to violence. In so doing, we seek to navigate debates about the nature and purpose of critical geopolitical research given that the historical, intellectual and political contexts in which it was formed have changed.

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1. Introduction – Imagine no religion?

In February 2013 Richard Dawkins, retired biologist and author of global best-seller *The God Delusion*, tweeted ‘Haven’t read Koran so couldn’t quote chapter & verse like I can for Bible. But often say Islam greatest force for evil today.’¹ Dismissing criticism that it was unscientific to make such a startling claim in ignorance of the primary source material, he tweeted back, ‘Of course you can have an opinion about Islam without having read Qur’an. You don’t have to read *Mein Kampf* to have an opinion about nazism.’²

These comments triggered a debate concerning whether the arguments of Dawkins and likeminded atheist authors had, as Lean (2013) contended on *salon.com*, ‘slid seamlessly into xenophobia.’ He claimed that this ‘rant’ had exposed ‘a disturbing Islamophobic streak’ in the work not only of Dawkins, but fellow best-selling ‘New Atheist’ writers Sam Harris and recently-deceased

Christopher Hitchens (Lean, 2013). Writing for *Al-Jazeera*, Hussain went further, accusing this group of giving ‘a veneer of scientific respectability to today’s politically-useful bigotry.’ To this extent, he argued, they were the heirs of the European Enlightenment’s ‘scientific racism’ (Hussain, 2013). Referring to outspoken ‘New Atheist’ support of George W. Bush’s ‘War on Terror,’ Hussain added that this racism was being used ‘to justify the wars of aggression, torture and extra-judicial killings.’

This exchange illustrates and frames the key concern of this article, the geopolitics of ‘New Atheism.’ We enquire how the critical geopolitics of religion and religious geopolitics (Sturm, 2013) can make a distinctive contribution to assessing what we term ‘the John Lennon thesis’ – that an atheist utopia in which we can imagine ‘no religion’ would necessarily be one where ‘all the people’ could live ‘life in peace.’³ A geographical version of this thesis has recently been advanced by Simon Springer (2016), who argues that atheism is a better basis for pacific spatial emancipation than is religion.

We begin by asking what the nature and purpose of critical

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¹ @RichardDawkins 28/2/2013.

² @RichardDawkins 25/3/2013.

³ John Lennon, *Imagine*, 1971.

geopolitical research is, given that the historical, intellectual and political contexts in which it was formed have changed. Arguing that there remains a role for the textual study of elite militaristic mappings of global space, we then examine the relationship between geographical study and religion, and note the lack of geographical engagement with atheism. We briefly sketch some notes on the meaning and history of atheism to provide context to the 'New Atheists' as inheritors of a Western Enlightenment tradition. The substantive section of the paper then examines their writings on the War on Terror, showing how their stark Orientalist imaginative geographies (Gregory, 2004) acted as an incitement to violence. The conclusion attempts to make sense of the apparently-paradoxical finding that New Atheism's most prominent spokesmen criticise religion as a cause of political violence, yet openly advocate contentious military resolutions to the geopolitical scenarios they construct.

For New Atheist thinkers, the argument that religions begets violence is not merely historical. For them, the belief that violence is ontogenetic to religion translates into a normative vision that is expressed in political and geopolitical terms, framing contemporary geopolitical insecurities as the inevitable consequence of a single bitter root – religion. This vision leads some of them to articulate vociferous support for the Bush and Blair-era War on Terror. This reduction and repackaging of complex and multi-layered geopolitical issues as a vociferously-trumpeted essentialism is, in its illusory monocausality and seductive simplicity, as misleading as the classical geopolitics of Mackinder and Ratzel.

The specific question addressed by this article is: "*What is the relationship between geopolitics and New Atheism?*" This focus is important because (somewhat unusually for public intellectuals) New Atheist writers not only trumpeted support for the 'War on Terror,' but have also reached a mass market with their geopolitical visions by 'stratospheric' global book sales (Sparrow, 2015). There is thus a disciplinary as well as a political imperative to interrogate their work and thereby contribute to considering the broader question of how deeply-held beliefs are productive of geopolitical visions of peace or violence (Megoran, 2013). We begin with the relationship between geographical thinking and irreligion.

2. Critical geopolitics: beyond the text, beyond the Global War on Terror?

This paper is a critical geopolitical analysis of texts about Islam and the so-called Global War on Terror (GWOT) produced by New Atheist writers mostly in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Because the focus of critical geopolitics has shifted to conflict zones since the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and because critical geopolitics itself has developed significantly since that period, it is perfectly legitimate to ask whether the analysis that we undertake in the way that we do is still both politically useful and intellectually valid. Before continuing, it is therefore necessary to address these concerns: and in so doing, we make an argument for the continued relevance and indeed the urgent importance of a critical geopolitical engagement with elite textual mappings of global space in core capitalist states. It is a truism that how we see the world affects how we act in it. Critical geopolitics translates this basic insight into the contention that our imaginative mappings of global space affect the way we see ourselves and others and thus 'do' global politics.

Critical geopolitics emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s as "the moniker for the writings of a loose assemblage of political geographers concerned to challenge the taken for granted geographical specifications of politics on the large scale" (Dalby, 2010, p. 280). Rooted in critical International Relations theory's rejection of realist paradigms of understanding the international

(Krause and Williams, 1997), its particular contribution to this project is the interrogation of how geographical reasoning is used in the service of state power (Dalby, 1996, p. 656). Emphasising the systematic analysis of texts as discourse (Toal, 2003), its initial concerns were to critically revisit foundational classical geopolitical sources (Ó Tuathail, 1996), and use this analysis to critique reworkings of classical geopolitical reasoning in the Cold War (Dalby, 1990; Sharp, 2000) and post-Cold War world (Campbell, 1992).

From 2001 onwards, GWOT occasioned a renewed and urgent reapplication of critical geopolitical thought to the mappings of global space that allowed the Al-Qaeda Islamist terror attacks of September 2001 to be translated into the disastrous US and UK-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. This invasion provoked a global upsurge in retaliatory Islamist terrorism, precipitating the rise of the apocalyptic and genocidal Islamic State group (Cockburn, 2014). ISIS proclaimed the reestablishment of a Caliphate whose tyranny rapidly expanded from Iraq to fill unstable voids from Nigeria and Libya to Syria and Afghanistan, as well inspiring murder across Europe, Norton America and Australasia. How did a deadly criminal attack by a marginal and extreme militant Muslim group lead to this (ongoing) catastrophe? The conceptual and analytical tools developed by critical geopolitics proved adept at providing answers, explaining how the mapping of 9/11 onto a global cartographic imagination of safe and dangerous places made sense of a complex world, reasserted identities, and justified the cataclysmic violence of the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan (Dalby, 2003). Further, these texts insisted with Dalby that "geopolitical scripts could have been otherwise" (Dalby, 2003, p. 65): in other words, these outcomes were not inevitable and critical geopolitical scholarship has a moral and political obligation to challenge them and thus point the way to less violent ways of doing global politics.

Critical geopolitics has been primarily shaped, then, by the challenge of using Critical International Relations theory to interrogate how elite texts discursively geo-graphed three major conflicts: the imperial rivalries culminating in the 1914–18 and 1939–45 World Wars, the Cold War, and the Global War on Terror. Critical geopolitics could have been a niche concern of a small number of scholars located in a particular geopolitical and theoretical moment in the 1990s. However, its demonstrable purchase on contemporary events meant it became more mainstream in the academy. Given both the changing nature of global geopolitics, and the broader range of perspectives and topics with which it engaged, it was inevitable that the frameworks set by its beginnings would prove inadequate, opening the field to a range of critiques and new directions.

The majority of these interventions critique the inadequacy of critical geopolitics' perceived focus on particularly textual representations as a key to understanding elite geopolitical thinking, often expressed as a frustration that the materiality of the 'everyday' is obscured. For Thrift (2000), in a key intervention drawing on non-representational theory, our 'mesmerised attention to texts' obscures attention to 'little things' such as the human body and the dialogic significance of the utterances themselves. Meanwhile Amore (2006) and Bialasiewicz (2012) show how bodies become the expressions of geopolitical space through militarised and technologized apparatuses and infrastructures of surveillance and control. At the same time the emotional (Pain, 2009) and affective (Carter & McCormack, 2006; Toal, 2003) dimensions of understanding geopolitics have been advanced.

Critical Geopolitics has been faulted for an ethnocentric focus on the international relations of core capitalist states (Megoran, 2006). Methodologically, researchers have shown how ethnography can illuminate the experiences of non-elites in non-spectacular contexts (McConnell, 2009; Megoran, 2006) and emphasised the need

to explore how texts circulate and are used (Dittmer & Dodds, 2008). Geographers have repeatedly insisted on the importance of locating geopolitical discourses in the structural development of states in the capitalist world (Agnew, 2003; Flint & Taylor, 2007) and that critical geopolitics wrestle more seriously with the materiality of the world (Squire, 2015). Kuus (2008) and Dittmer (2014) have pointed to the usefulness of exploring how elites actually *do* international relations as individuals in their everyday lives. Comics and cartoons (Rech, 2014), films (Power, 2007) and other non-textual cultural productions have been mined for their geopolitical significance. A range of scholars have pushed at a disembodied critical geopolitics's ethical commitments (Dowler & Sharp, 2001; Hyndman, 2010; Megoran, 2008) and the extent to which it has adequately sought to seek peaceful alternatives to the cartographies of violence it critiques (Jones & Sage, 2010; Megoran, 2010).

This is far from an exhaustive list of relevant authors or themes, but is rather used to indicate the multiplicity of topics, methods, questions and theoretical and conceptual traditions that have gathered under the banner of critical geopolitics. This multiplicity raises an obvious question: is it possible and necessary to devise some new unifying framework and research agenda to draw the increasingly disparate threads of Critical Geopolitical thought together?

Jason Dittmer would apparently answer this question in the affirmative. Writing with Nicholas Gray in 2010, he criticised popular geopolitics' focus on elite texts, and called for the "adoption of a new research agenda" emphasising "everyday life" that "moves away from the deconstruction of texts and instead shifts to the practices of everyday life" (Dittmer & Gray, 2010, pp. 1664, 1674). Although this paper contained the caveat that they were not "trying to impose a new theoretical orthodoxy" (Dittmer & Gray, 2010, p. 1664), in 2014 Dittmer makes a sophisticated attempt to reposition critical geopolitics by using assemblage/complexity theory as "a way to integrate a wide range of tensions already extant within the critical geopolitical project" (Dittmer, 2014, p. 396). However the insistence that the broad-ranging and exciting field be tied to a single moment in recent Western thought, and the ethical questions opened up by its speculative posthumanism, will encounter resistance.

In contrast to Dittmer, other scholars have overwhelmingly answered the question in the negative. Gearóid Ó Tuathail is almost dismissive of the question, remarking that "Critical Geopolitics is no more than a general gathering place for various critiques of the multiple geopolitical discourses and practices that characterize modernity." Power and Campbell (2010) argue that Critical Geopolitics is not a single analytical or methodological endeavour, but rather a "corpus of scholarship" which "encompasses various ways of unpacking the tropes and epistemologies of dominant geographies and scriptings of political space" (Power & Campbell, 2010, p. 244). Fraser Macdonald (in MacDonald, Hughes, & Dodds, 2010, p. 628) describes the continued circulation of classical geopolitical ideas as "the 'undead' character of classical geopolitics." He accepts that interventions using Non-Representational Theory have been useful and that there is room for them, but argues that if this means that Critical Geopolitics loses sight of classical geopolitics or becomes uninterested in militaristic mappings of global space "then it risks becoming an academic fad" (MacDonald et al., 2010, p. 318). This consensus is summed up by Newman, who contends that "There is no one geopolitics, nor is there any need for such a rigid framework" (Newman, 2006, pp. 627–8).

Nonetheless, Simon Dalby sounds a note of caution. Although he agrees that "there is nothing close to a consensus" on what 'Critical Geopolitics' designates (Dalby, 2010, p. 280), he opines that if it "is

to have any coherence within the discipline, it is still about trying to challenge militarist mappings of global space" (Dalby, 2010, p. 281). He takes a particular objection to Thrift's oft-cited intervention, for 'his suggested agenda eviscerates the political purpose of critical geopolitics' (282). He continues that "it is frequently not exactly clear how this engagement with ... the lived experiences of people in various dangerous contexts, necessarily connects to the problematization of the discourses used to legitimate the practices of violence" (283). Thus for Dalby the issue is not how to create a unified theoretical framework (and especially not one drawn around theories that he suspects delegitimise critiques of violence); but rather, in a world where the ability of great powers to enact violence remains real, how the geographical sense-making behind those strategies can be contested.

Jenkings and Woodward (2014) follow Dalby, acknowledging that the textually-orientated, representation-focussed approach of critical geopolitics has been challenged by arguments for a renewal of approaches to geopolitics more attentive to its lived, experiential dimensions. However, their research uncovers that memoirs (written by both officers and private soldiers) have a key position in articulating morality and meaning of the Afghanistan war. Like Dalby, they see the unpacking of militarist mappings of global space as a core concern of the critical geopolitics project, and argue the case for 'the continued salience of textual sources in critical geopolitical inquiry' (Jenkings and Woodward, 2014, p. 495).

We agree with this position. In a world that remains extraordinarily violent, we contend that the task of critically understanding mappings of global space remains vital. We therefore recognise both the necessity and value of the multiplicity of questions, approaches and methods which have been brought to enhance and refine the project of Critical Geopolitics – so long as they serve to illuminate rather than obscure questions of power and violence. Furthermore, given the ongoing effects of the disastrous GWOT, it is still necessary to study the imaginative cartographies of those who supported it by encoding 9/11 in certain ways (as we do here, with the New Atheists). And we insist that the analysis of texts alone remains one valid avenue of research, amongst many. There is still a role for Critical Geopolitics, because before wars can be fought, they have to be thought.

3. The geopolitics of (ir)religion

Over the past decade a growing literature on the critical geopolitics of religion has interrogated the ways in which active agents derive political geographical visions from religious beliefs (Agnew, 2010; Amarasingam, 2010; Dittmer, 2013; Haynes, 2013; Megoran, 2006; Sturm, 2013). This work has shown that theological visions and spiritual practices inform and reproduce spatial imaginaries of global politics that variously reinforce (Megoran, 2006; Sturm, 2008; Agnew, 2010; Dittmer and Sturm 2010) or challenge (Gerhardt, 2008; Megoran, 2012) violence.

A notable absence in this work is any consideration of what we call the 'geopolitics of atheism.' If, as the literature on religion shows, theistic systems are indeed sometimes productive of violent geopolitical visions, does it follow logically that atheistic ones therefore lend themselves to a more 'pacific geopolitics'? (Megoran, 2010). This is a question that 'New Atheist' authors answer in the affirmative. Their work is characterised not only by orthodox atheist arguments that the claims of theism are unnecessary and unconvincing, but by a particular stress that theism is innately violent and inevitably productive of discrimination, intolerance and war. As shall be demonstrated through an investigation of the three most prominent New Atheist writers – Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens – New Atheists assert that atheism inexorably leads to more just and peaceful ways of human

existence.

Surprisingly, there has been little scholarship on the relationships between atheism and violence or peace. In the introduction to their authoritative overview, philosophers Bullivant and Ruse (2013, p. 2) claim that academic study of atheism has been 'unjustly neglected' and that 'significant lacunae' persist. Even within these few studies, atheism's political consequences seldom attract more than a footnote. Philosophy and sociology are the primarily fields for the study of atheism, but neither has been particularly interested in the relationship between atheism and violence or international relations. Tellingly, neither of the two most recent edited 'companion' volumes on the study of atheism contain a chapter on the politics of atheism (Bullivant & Ruse, 2013; Martin, 2007). The only scholarly publication we could identify which explicitly asks about the politics of New Atheism is an article by Kettell (2013, p. 62), who recognises that even within the 'embryonic' research on New Atheism, its political dimension has been 'peculiarly absent.' He sketches out what he calls 'a baseline for further research into the political dimensions of New Atheism' by focusing on its 'organisational, strategic and public policy dimensions.' The links between (New) atheism and foreign policy, geopolitics or violence more generally are absent.

Other fields offer more promise. Historians sometimes, incidentally, touch upon the significance of atheism as a factor behind totalitarian violence in the twentieth century (Conquest, 1986; Husband, 2000; Pospelovsky, 1987), but the political links between atheism and violence have rarely been investigated in any depth. Despite a burgeoning interest in 'post-secularism' (Cloke & Beaumont, 2012) the only publication we are aware of by geographers on atheism is a chapter by Warf (2014) in an edited volume on geographies of religion. A welcome contribution to a neglected subject, it offers a geographical perspective on the traditional sociological question of the spread of atheist convictions, by mapping the changing distribution of atheists globally and within the United States. Warf contends that in contrast to "religion's devastating social and psychological costs," typified by war and multiple forms of other violence, atheism promises to be "emancipatory and self-liberating" (Warf, 2014, p. 26). But as his empirical focus is on the historical geographies of atheism, unfortunately this claim does not move beyond assertion. To understand atheism, we need to turn to broader literature.

4. Atheisms, ancient and modern

The word "atheism" stems from the Greek *ἄθεος*; *a-theos*, "without deities", and can be simply defined as a lack of belief in supernatural agents (Bullivant & Ruse, 2013, p. 13; Baggini, 2003, p. 3). But defining atheism in this way is not as simple as it perhaps sounds. Despite Socrates' memorable invocations of *theos* in texts such as *Timmaeus*, in Plato's *Apology* the bumbling Meletus accuses Socrates of being 'a complete atheist.' Similarly the early Christians were persecuted for 'atheism,' not because they disbelieved in God but because they avowed that the Roman pantheon of gods (and, most seditiously, the Emperor himself) were not divine. Clearly questions of definition and genealogy are important to the study of atheism, but they are beyond the scope of this article.

Nonetheless a brief historical context is necessary. New Atheism finds its roots in the Enlightenment. It is only with the publication of Baron d'Holbach's *System of Nature* (1770) that we see the first self-professed atheist text in which *a-theos* is presented as a philosophical code. Yet there were no calls for the state to adopt atheistic policies (Buckley, 1987, pp. 322–63). Voltaire bewailed that 'the thinking part of mankind [i.e., the atheist *philosophes*] is confined to a very small number, and these will never disturb the peace and tranquillity of the world' (quoted in Spencer & Krauze,

2010, p. 133).

Subsequent centuries proved Voltaire's prediction wrong. The French Revolution signals the first attempt at state secularism, under a Jacobin government which sought a form of state atheism (Buckley, 1987, pp. 42–55). This brief experiment was terminated by Napoleon, who saw religion as necessary to govern populations. In contrast, the Soviet Union placed atheism as central to its project to remake humanity (Poliakov, 1992), as manifest in official state policy and the formation of citizen projects with such eyebrow-raising names as the *League of the Militant Godless* (Peris, 1998). However, a tension remained between commissars organising assaults against religion, and citizens practising 'accommodation, compliance, obedience, apathy, resignation' (Husband, 2000, p. xi).

Atheism as a professed ideology is therefore quite young, and there is little historical precedent for reflection on atheistic geopolitics. For most of its (short) history atheism was the preserve of a tiny elite, although scholars widely assumed that modernisation would gradually erode religiosity (Berger, 1999; Nielsen, 1985; Stenger, 2009; Thrower, 2000). What has instead happened is a twofold opposite. First, the widespread revival and politicisation of religion from the 1970s onwards, what Berger (1999) calls 'the desecularisation of the world' and Kepel (1994) 'the revenge of God.' Second, and perhaps in response to this, atheism has expanded as a popular ideology and manifested as a more systematic, politically-motivated, and popular philosophy: New Atheism.

5. New Atheism

Undoubtedly the most striking phenomenon in recent atheist thought is the emergence of 'New Atheism,' coined by Gary Wolf in a 2006 article 'The Church of Non-Believers.' The key contributions to this literature are a series of anti-theistic, politically-inclined books which appeared in the aftermath of 9/11: Sam Harris' *End of Faith* (2004), Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (2007), and the late Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great* (2007). Although they do not invoke the term 'New Atheist,' they play with their negative characterisation as 'aggressive and dangerous' (Zenk, 2013, p. 254).

Furthermore, little of what the New Atheists say is actually new. Ostling (2013) contends that most of their arguments were made with greater force and eloquence by the Enlightenment *philosophes*. Kluge (2009) argues that if we analyse the 'old atheists' we see that they covered almost all of the major themes of the New Atheists:

'materialism, the adequacy of science to solve all problems, religion as part of our evolutionary past, the inherent conflict of reason and faith or religion, the rejection of super-sensible aspects of the universe, attempts to disprove philosophical arguments for the existence of god, the concept of God as a social control mechanism, and a militant denunciation of religion' (Kluge, 2009:4).

If their arguments are not particularly new, why has the concept of New Atheism attracted such attention? We identify three reasons.

First, New Atheists' views that any religion is not only false, but indelibly malevolent. British satirical magazine *Private Eye* (1374, 2014) once captured this by describing Richard Dawkins as not so much disbelieving in God, as regarding God as a personal enemy. McGrath (2005, p. 25) calls this 'anti-theism – an intense anger against religion, which is held to poison everything.' Amarasingham (2010, p. 2) likewise suggests that New Atheism 'is not entirely about new ideas, but a kind of evangelical revival and repacking of old ideas.' This 'repacking' has created a 'newfound urgency' in the

message and generated a social revival in atheism.

Second, New Atheism is not a passive philosophy but an active product of current geopolitical configurations between Western liberal democracies and majority-Muslim countries (including their diasporas). Huntington's (1993: 42) 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis argued that civilizations are 'differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition and, most important, *religion*,' and that these civilisations will increasingly be the basis of international conflict. Although this thesis has been relentlessly critiqued, it received a fillip with the growth of anti-western Jihadism as epitomised by al-Qaeda, Boko Haram and ISIS, and military responses led by United States Presidents who invoked the Almighty in their visions. It is no coincidence that the term 'New Atheist' was coined at this time, as the idea that secular Western democracies are involved in a fundamental struggle with militant Islam has energised a vociferous atheist critique of religion. Tellingly, Hobson (2013) argues that the New Atheists see Islamic terrorism as a synecdoche not merely of Islam, Abrahamic faiths, or monotheism, but indeed of the very *concept* of religion – in their eyes, a force inimical to peace and anathema to geopolitical security.

Third, the media success of New Atheism. The climate of fear over violent Islamic jihadism has fuelled media interest in the movement (Amarasingam, 2010; Zenk, 2013). New Atheist writers are charismatic and media-savvy, while their combative and acerbic style and willingness to make bold generalisations about the apparent evils of religion make them media-friendly in a way that contrasts with the more ponderous style of academic philosophy. Their success at writing bestselling books and giving engaging public talks, and their ability to increase their global profiles through social media, have created substantial followings and made them minor celebrities. Dawkins and his books have appeared as a recognisable character and props in popular broadcasts such as *South Park* (#1012, 2006) and *Family Guy* (#6ACX03, 2008), and he himself has made cameo appearances in *Dr Who* (#7C/T, 2005; #198a, 2008) and *The Simpsons* (#RABF09, 2013). Zaimov (2013) acknowledges that this 'shows that [Dawkins'] name alone is being recognized in pop culture.'

The grouping of these thinkers under the same label has contributed to an unprecedented period of confidence and enthusiasm within atheism more generally (Eller, 2009, p. 14). We accept that New Atheism is, like all labels, contested and over-simplifying. Nonetheless, because of the above historical, conceptual, and inter-referential reasons we will treat it here as a legitimate delimitation of a field of thought to begin a study of the geopolitics of atheism. The remainder of this article will thus consider the specifically geopolitical scripts promulgated by these thinkers.

6. New Atheism, Islam and the War on Terror

A recurring critique of Western operations in the War on Terror is that they are the military and geopolitical expression of Islamophobia, with critics characterising the war as a conflict not merely against terrorism but against Islam itself, written to the script of Huntington's clash of civilisations. Such claims do not bear critical scrutiny. The allied coalition has formed military pacts with governments of majority-Muslim countries, and military collaboration to combat jihadism has taken place extensively across the Muslim world (Cockburn, 2014). Yet in opposition to politicians' reassurances of Muslim-Western solidarity, New Atheist writers take an opposing, normative view. For them, not only is the War on Terror a conflict against Islam (and religion itself), but moreover, it *should be*.

Earlier in the paper it was suggested that the New Atheist writers have little to say that is new, or even particularly eloquent,

as the Enlightenment thinkers outlined state irreligion long before Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens. Similarly, the tropes of religion as inherently violent, Islam as particularly threatening (and irreconcilable with the West), Western superiority, and civilizational burden, are little more than New Atheist retellings of colonialist discourse. Indeed, New Atheists' representations of the Islamic Other, and the territories inhabited by Muslim majorities, reads as little more than a retelling of the 'imaginative geographies' (Gregory, 2004, p. 12) of Columbian and post-Columbian colonial modernity. By representing Islam as an irreconcilable Other, and their territories as part of a grand geopolitical script, New Atheist writings create an artificial binary wherein 'an optical ... disciplined ... standardized space' of Western modernity and a 'primitive, wild, and ... capricious' (Gregory, 2004, pp. 3–4) *doppelgänger* act out a hackneyed political, geopolitical, and civilizational script. New Atheists' portrayal of Islam not only as territorially definable, and an object capable of being controlled and even subdued by Western imaginaries of state discipline, bears more than a few similarities with the Orientalist gaze. However two noticeable distinctions make New Atheist geopolitical narratives noteworthy.

First, as alluded to above, is the mass circulation and popularity of New Atheist narratives. Between 2008 and 2014 *The God Delusion* sold more than three million copies and has been translated into thirty-five languages,⁴ while Sam Harris' and Christopher Hitchens' books, like those of Dawkins, enjoyed record periods in the upper echelons of the *New York Times* bestseller list. These books did not appear in isolation, but during the high point of neoconservative rhetoric surrounding the early Blair-Bush GWOT campaigns – and Western backlashes against both – following 9/11. This provided a nourishing climate for popular, digestible pop-politics books which spoke to the re-ignition of centuries-old Western fears of Islam (Said, 2003b, pp. 55–64) and offered a seductive geopolitical script in an era of growing domestic and international concerns on the relationship between state, faith, and violence.

Second is a normative dissonance between 'classical' Orientalism and the pithy spatialisations of the New Atheists. Said identifies Orientalism as a series of politicised representations embedded in cultural practices – as Gregory (2004, p. 8) defines, using Marx; "they cannot represent themselves, so they must be represented." The New Atheists, though, do not simply represent the Islamic Other as a deviation to be categorised and controlled, either through phenomenological technologies of culture or through overt military and administrative force. As outlined below, New Atheists advocate a much more emphatic political agenda which seeks not to *subjugate* the Other, but to *eliminate* the very cultures which define her. Where Said saw the imaginative geographies of Orientalism as attempts to control the Other by slotting her into a vague and often arbitrary series of categories (Said, 2003a, pp. 56–58) in a crude binary of 'our land-barbarian land' (Said, 2003a, p. 54), New Atheist texts expand the geopolitical script of Islam/Muslim into a synecdoche of 'un-Western/un-modern' which acquires a somewhat fuzzy status between territorial and deterritorialized category. By replicating the artificial civilised/savage binary of imaginative geographies (see especially Gregory, 2004, pp. 47–75) and a political and geopolitical agenda framed by belief in a Manichean struggle in which one must not simply *subordinate* another but *expunge* it, the New Atheists replicate the sweeping narrative of Said – but with a visible, sinister call to use this narrative to influence policymaking.

Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens supported the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, and Harris and Hitchens the Iraq invasion in 2003 (the latter two being particularly outspoken in their support

⁴ @RichardDawkins 3/9/2014.

of the War on Terror). Core themes can be identified among popular New Atheist writers. Arguably their dominant theme is that institutionalised religion – any religion – is dangerous and will inevitably lead to negative consequences. Islam draws criticism from New Atheists who deny claims that there is a distinction between Islam and Islamic jihadism, and argue that allied governments are incapable of winning the war as they cannot (or refuse to) acknowledge the true nature and scope of the threat facing them. We identify four themes in New Atheist writing on the normative relationship between religion, violence, and geopolitics. These are: religion automatically begets violence; Islam as the primary religious threat; the West as a superior (and apparently homogeneous) civilisation; and finally a normative geopolitics which blends the White Man's Burden with militant irreligion.

All of these, as will be seen, are anathema to critical geopolitical inquiry.

6.1. Religion begets violence

'Mothers were skewered on swords as their children watched. Young women were stripped and raped in broad daylight, then ... set on fire. A pregnant woman's belly was slit open, her foetus raised skywards on the tip of the sword and then tossed onto one of the fires that blazed across the city' (Harris, 2004: 27).

The first chapter of Sam Harris' *The End of Faith* (2004) reproduces the above report of Muslim-Hindu communal violence in India. It frames Harris' vision that such atrocity cannot be explained by 'rational' factors such as economics or political factionalism, as 'the only difference between these groups consists in what they believe about God' (Harris, 2004, p. 24). This may be an extreme example but it serves to illustrate one of the defining *a priori* assumption of New Atheist thought; that religion of all forms inevitably creates violence, which can be wholly explained by religion while political, social and historical factors are dismissed as marginal or irrelevant. As Harris boldly opines 'religion is the most prolific source of violence in our history' (2004: 27).

Hitchens echoes this belief in *God is Not Great* (2007). His first substantive chapter, 'Religion Kills', offers a narrative in which Hitchens selects various places beginning with the letter 'B', taking the reader on a mind-map tour of the 'religiously-inspired cruelty' he has witnessed as a journalist in Belfast, Bosnia, Baghdad, Belgrade, Bethlehem and Beirut. In all these cases, he claims: 'once again, religion had poisoned everything' (2007: 14 [emphasis in original]).

The New Atheists regard religious beliefs as impervious to political reasoning and thus inevitably productive of violence when taken to their logical conclusion. On this basis, they conclude that organised religions represent an existential threat to rational, secular liberal democracy. Because followers of a faith live in 'a world beyond reason' (Harris, 2007, p. 39) and because religions 'place their adherents beyond the reach of every peaceful persuasion,' secularism must be defended by not only argument but also force. This view maps out simplistic geopolitical imaginaries of the War on Terror. In the introduction to Sam Harris' *Letter to a Christian Norton* (Harris, 2011), Dawkins (2011, p. ix) writes 'I think that the crimes done in the name of religion really do follow from religious faith.' Thus the September 2001 attacks can be explained purely by virtue of the religiosity of the attackers. Referring to a traditional Islamic belief in sexual rewards for devout males in the afterlife, he writes that 'testosterone-sodden young men too unattractive to get a woman in this world might be desperate enough to go for 72 private virgins in the next.' For Dawkins (2001), the 9/11 attacks exclusively 'came from religion,' the 'deadly weapon' which is 'the

underlying source of the divisiveness in the Middle East.'

Startlingly, yet in-keeping with the unwitting re-telling of Orientalist imaginary geographies, the New Atheists present al-Qaeda as apolitical. This offers an insight into the scripted dynamic of New Atheist geopolitics in which only the (apparently) secularised West is rational – any indication of rational political agency in the 'barbaric lands' (Gregory, 2004) is simply reclassified in a *lumpencategory* of "irrational religiosity". This automatically strips anti-Western groups of a rational agenda or objectives, as demoting them into a religious rather than political movement abnegates any Western effort to reconcile, pursue pacific geopolitics, or even acknowledge the Other as legitimate. The false binary of a geopolitical script defined not only by civilised and savage but by an existential, apocalyptic struggle between good and evil, is perpetuated; the 'blowback' from complex and intertwined histories and geographies of Middle East and US politics (Johnson, 2002), tensions and struggles within the Arab societies from which the attackers came, and the grievances and goals of the attackers, have no place in this story. It is thus unsurprising that Dawkins, although he opposed the Iraq intervention, was sympathetic to the invasion of Afghanistan (Kennard, 2013).

The belief that all religions are an affront to rational thought and peace is a standard assumption in the core New Atheist texts. Yet a hierarchy of iniquity seems to exist, with special ire directed at Islam.

6.2. Islam as existential threat

Dawkins has increasingly singled out Islam as 'one of the great evils in the world' (Dawkins, 2011). He is disparaging of the attempts to differentiate moderate from violent Islam, as 'respect for religion enables religious extremism' (Dawkins, 2006). Harris reflects this, dissecting Qur'anic and Hadithic beliefs about Islam being a final revelation and there being a distinct geopolitical imperative to spread the religion and punish blasphemers, heretics, and apostates. The problem with fundamentalist Islam, he argues, is precisely its fundamentals: to convert, subjugate, or kill infidels (Harris, 2014). He is exasperated with Western moderates who refuse to accept the writings of jihadists at face value and explain away their actions in terms of political and social grievances. 'We can ignore all of these things,' Harris argues, 'because the world is filled with poor, uneducated, and exploited peoples who do not commit acts of terrorism' (2004: 108). Observing that the 9/11 attackers were 'well-educated, middle class,' he argues that rather than try and seek hidden psychological explanations it is more reasonable to assume that 'men like Bin Laden *actually believe* what they say they believe ... in the literal truth of the Koran' and its promise of a reward in the afterlife for those who die in the service of Islam (2004: 28–9).

Hitchens shares this view, perceiving 'the raucous propaganda of Mecca and Medina' as the greatest religious threat to liberal societies founded on 'the rational' (2007: 332). Although he believes that Islam is based on superstition and a contradictory pastiche of pre-Islamic beliefs, foreign texts, and belief systems plundered from Byzantium (2007: chapter 9), it nonetheless inspires masses to violence. For Hitchens, Islam's gravest threat is its intolerance of free speech. As a result it has succeeded in intimidating and silencing those who would question or reject it across a substantial swathe of the planet (Anthony, 2010). In a prescient foretelling of ISIS, Hitchens believed Islamic terrorists were hoping to redraw the Middle East map, because 'they don't think Iraq should exist. They don't recognise the borders of Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine – they think it should all be part of a huge Islamic caliphate' (Hitchens, 2005a). The overthrow of the Taliban was welcomed by most Afghans as liberation from an 'atrocious

tyranny': indeed, Afghanistan 'is the first country to be bombed out of the Stone Age' (Hitchens, 2008a, p. 67).

Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens are convinced that jihadist violence is a direct, logical and indeed inevitable consequence of Islam. For the New Atheists, this makes Islam an irreconcilable and existential threat to a Western society which, despite the blood-soaked pages of its own history, they interpret as historically superior.

6.3. Western superiority

New Atheist renderings of the War on Terror are not unanimous, but a theme emerges. In the New Atheist narrative the Western allies are the violated innocent, faced with monstrous irrationality rooted in a backward religion (Hitchens, 2001a). This threat, they argue, is inevitable as the War on Terror is a clash of unequal civilisations, with the West as the dominant civilisation. This is a rather poor telling of geopolitics. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, as Dalby (2003) shows, geopolitical designations of the attacks were up for grabs, with profound consequences for subsequent responses. The New Atheists' interventions reinforced dominant narratives of the nature of the struggle as moral-metaphysical rather than political, and the nature of the enemy as indelibly irrational and dangerous. Thus geopolitical contest becomes framed as an inevitable conflict that could not be resolved by debate, diplomacy, or international law, only weaponry.

This is fused to a disparaging view of Islam as backwards and at an inferior stage of development. 'All the world's Muslims,' tweeted Dawkins in 2011, 'have fewer Nobel Prizes than Trinity College, Cambridge.'⁵ Similarly, civilizational superiority can be identified as a factor behind Hitchens' support of the Iraq War. He regarded Saddam Hussein's regime as an example of the fanatical form of Islam that so endangered the West, which the West mistakenly regarded as secular (2004, 29–31). How does Hitchens – whose earlier career was marked by his identification with the anti-war movement (Hitchens, 2002a) – reach this startling position? We contend that it is a product of a geopolitical vision informed by his particular understanding of theism and atheism. The 9/11 attacks led him to feel 'exhilaration' because it was no longer possible to underestimate the threat posed to secular civilisation, and clarified that the allies were involved in an 'unmistakable confrontation between everything I loved and everything I hated' (Hitchens, 2008a, p. 63). This secular Western pluralism was only achieved 'after several wars and revolutions had ruthlessly smashed the hold of the clergy', and Hitchens is proud that he has spent his life 'on the atheist side of the argument' (Hitchens, 2004a). In contrast, those who use violence to enforce Sharia law's 'Bronze Age morality' are 'morons and philistines who hate Darwin and Einstein' (Hitchens, 2002b). As medieval Christianity shows, 'you cannot run anything but a primeval and cruel and stupid society out of the precepts of one rather mediocre "revelation"' (Hitchens, 2002b).

Notwithstanding this painfully simplistic essentialisation of medieval histories, this sentiment is echoed by Harris' support of allied military interventions. Harris' vision is consequently framed by a stark geopolitical script which pits secular against sacred, sober atheist versus zealous theist, and Western civilisation against Islamic barbarism, with no room for subtleties or distinctions. Explicitly endorsing Huntington's 'clash of civilisation' thesis (2004a, 130) and excoriating the liberal dogma of successive US and UK governments that they are not at war with Islam, Harris insists 'We are at war with Islam,' not merely with 'an otherwise peaceful religion that has been "hijacked" by extremists' (2004a, 109).

While Christianity was initially, and occasionally still, the target of the New Atheists, the particular contempt which they reserve for Islam is reflected clearly in their language (Al-Jazeera, 2015; Ong, 2016). For Hitchens, the allies are right to fight the jihadists ('the scum of the earth,' Hitchens, 2001b) and should 'be willing and able, if not in fact eager, to kill them without pity' (Hitchens, 2002b). Indeed, Harris concludes *The End of Faith* by calling for a new Enlightenment to be attempted 'on the sole condition that we banish all religions from the discourse,' and to do that 'it has become necessary to know the enemy, and to prepare to fight it' (Hitchens, 2007, p. 41). Those who must fight, he argues, are Western nations who must carry the burden of a self-appointed moral authority.

6.4. The Western Man's Burden

Dawkins (2003) was scornful of the religiosity of President Bush, but a critical geopolitical reading of his interventions suggests they can be read as (inadvertently) supportive of the logic behind GWOT based not merely on defence against an apparently irrational and homogenous other, but upon an imagined Western duty. As Eagleton (2009) points out, Dawkins:

Preached a self-satisfied, old-fashioned Whiggish rationalism that can be wielded against a benighted Islam ... whether they like it or not, Dawkins and his ilk have become weapons in the war on terror ... Western supremacism has gravitated from the Bible to atheism (Eagleton, 2009).

'Some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them,' Harris writes in a startling passage (2004: 52–3). If such people 'cannot be captured ... otherwise tolerant people may be justified in killing them in self-defence' (Harris, 2004). Faced with such a threat, a peaceful geopolitics is 'flagrantly immoral' (2004: 199) and the allies must be prepared to countenance further wars. Thus he writes that 'however mixed or misguided our intentions were in launching [the Iraq war], we are attempting, at considerable cost to ourselves, to improve life for the Iraqi people' (Harris, 2005). At the same time, racial profiling is ostensibly justified: 'We should profile Muslims, or anyone who looks like he or she could conceivably be Muslim, and we should be honest about it' (Harris, 2012). This increasingly sinister logic translates – ironically, considering the New Atheists' denouncement of the apparent barbarisms of Islam alongside praise for Western morals – into support for judicial torture as a lesser evil than the terrorism it may prevent (2004: 194–5). At its extreme this argument posits that 'Muslims pose a special problem for nuclear deterrence' (2004: 128). The possibility of a theocracy combining Iron Age philosophy with 21st century military technology fuels, for Harris, an unsubstantiated assertion that because Muslims do not fear death, the fear of 'Mutually Assured Destruction' would not hold for an 'Islamist regime armed with long-range nuclear weapons.' Harris' proposed solution (2004: 129) to this hypothetical scenario offers the most chilling insight of New Atheist geopolitics: that 'the only thing likely to ensure our survival may be a nuclear first strike of our own'. Harris concedes that this would not be welcome – indeed, it would be 'an unthinkable crime' – but it may be 'the only course of action available to us, given what Islamists believe' (Harris, 2004).

If Sam Harris advances the implications of Richard Dawkins' equivocation, Hitchens openly relishes the violence of GWOT. He scorns those who opposed the US and UK invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and interpreted 9/11 as a reaction to U.S. foreign policy. By representing 'the worst face of Islam as the voice of the oppressed' (Hitchens, 2004a) the peace-movement has become 'fellow-

⁵ @RichardDawkins 8/8/2013.

travellers with fascism' (Hitchens, 2004b). In refusing to stand in solidarity with pro-democracy and pro-women opponents of Islamist regimes, the anti-war Western left (with which he once identified) thereby showed itself synonymous with 'a sort of affectless, neutralist, smirking isolationism' (Hitchens, 2008b, p. 108). He relished his break with the 'peace movement' of which he was once a member, writing that he 'wanted it to rain' on their anti-war demonstration (Hitchens, 2008e), and crowing 'Ha Ha Ha to the pacifists' as the US overthrew the Taliban regime (2001b). But his scorn for former comrades on the left was nothing compared to how he despised the jihadists:

We can't live on the same planet as them, and I'm glad because I don't want to. I don't want to breathe the same air as these psychopaths and murders [*sic*] and rapists and torturers and child abusers ... It's a duty and a responsibility to defeat them. But it's also a pleasure. I don't regard it as a grim task at all (Cited in Cavanaugh, 2009, 219).

Indeed, for Hitchens the Afghanistan invasion was to be applauded because peace with Islam 'is neither possible, nor desirable' (Hitchens, 2011) and the Iraq invasion was 'a war to be proud of' (Hitchens, 2005b). 'How did I get Iraq wrong?' he asks rhetorically amidst much hand-wringing by pundits on the fifth anniversary of the invasion. 'I didn't,' was his unrepentant reply to former allies on the left who now excoriated him as a 'model apostate' (Finkelstein, 2008).

Of course, it would be unfair to tar all atheists with the same brush. For Richard Seymour, Hitchens had become 'a poetaster of genocide' whose 'deranged fantasies about killing more and more evil-doers' attracted support only amongst Republican-voting 'malodorous macho assholes' and 'post-pubescent neophytic imperialists' (Seymour 2008: 326). Hitchens' borderline sadism is no more indicative of a homogeneous atheist bloc than the Taliban are of a homogeneous Islam – because neither exists. Yet he does symbolise identifiable strands of thinking among the dominant New Atheist writers. At the heart of Hitchens' extraordinary support of the War on Terror was his geopolitical vision. He was critical of both the visions of George W. Bush and what he called 'the peaceniks,' each of whom he accused of invoking geopolitical scripts (Dalby, 2003, 2007) based on previous scenarios which no longer acted as adequate explanatory frameworks. Instead, this new situation should be seen as a clash between secular and religious visions of organising society: indeed, the Taliban-bin Laden alliance represented for Hitchens 'an elemental challenge' to secular liberalism (Hitchens, 2001a) based not on rational political grievances but the 'insults' of seeing 'unveiled women, democracy, Jews, homosexuals, two-dimensional art, Hinduism, and the like' (Hitchens, 2001a). Theirs was 'an assault on all civilisation' (Hitchens, 2008c). And in a synecdoche of New Atheist writings, the solution is simple: violence. An irony indeed for a philosophy whose most vociferous proponents so loudly decry slaughter in the name of an idea.

7. Discussion and conclusions

New Atheism provided outspoken and vociferous support for the disastrous US and UK 'Global War on Terror,' and thus the critical analysis of it is both intellectually and politically important. Dawkins reduced the complicated and murky geopolitics of Western entanglements in the Middle East and Central Asia to the flat terrains of rational enlightenment versus irrational Islam. Hitchens relished lethal violence against 'Islamic fascism.' Harris was seemingly open to the possibility that in the war against Islam, racial profiling, torture, and killing people for simply professing

certain beliefs were acceptable. At its extreme, Harris' version of contemporary global geopolitics ends with a suggestion that we seriously consider a pre-emptive thermonuclear strike on an Islamic country that acquired nuclear technology.

These striking incitements to violence are based upon a vision in which the essential dynamic of global geopolitics is an imaginative geography on which is played out an apocalyptic, eschatological struggle between the West and Islam. Atheism is not incidental to this. At the core of this geopolitical vision is a fundamental belief that 'religion poisons everything' and that an endangered rational, pluralistic secular civilisation should be defended by arguments and armaments against the forces of theocracy. Although Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens argue that atheism and theism are distinguished by an absence-presence dichotomy according to which atheism is innocent – as nobody will die for a lack of belief – (Al-Jazeera, 2015) their geopolitical scripts reveal that this is an illusion. The obvious irony here is that writers who seemingly ground much of their opposition to religion on the argument that it is violent end up implicitly or explicitly justifying extraordinary degrees of violence themselves in the name of overcoming religion. We suggest four possible explanations of this apparent paradox.

The first is that atheism is not inherently violent, but in this particular case the New Atheists might be right. Perhaps there is a life-and-death civilizational struggle taking place between a certain form of Islam and liberal secularism, and this war *does* need fighting (Hitchens, 2008d, 2011). This is certainly how some Muslims perceive it. Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, self-proclaimed Caliph of so-called Islamic State, said 'Islam was never a religion of peace. Islam is the religion of fighting,' in an address that called on Muslims the world over to join the violent struggle against the enemies of Islam (BBC, 2015). Al-Baghdadi does not objectively and authentically represent Islam – who does? – but the traction that ISIS has created suggests that his vision is neither as marginal nor obscure as his detractors would like to believe. We would question this geopolitical account of civilizational struggle, and regard the Western interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya as disastrous. Nonetheless, the New Atheists' charge that liberals have failed to take jihadism seriously in its own terms cannot be easily dismissed.

A second explanation, after Sigmund Freud, is that the violence of militant atheism is a product of its *similarity* to religion. In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud contends that religions provide the psychological goods of belonging and comfort and, if eliminated, people seek an earthly figurehead to replace their lost spiritual father. In a hauntingly prescient passage, he argued that in order to eliminate religion from European civilisation 'you can only do it by means of another system of doctrines; and such a system would from the outset take over all the psychological characteristics of religion – the same sanctity, rigidity and intolerance' (Freud, 1973 [1927]: 47). It is possible to see a validation of Freud's thesis in the emergence of the Third Reich and Stalinism. Peter Sloterdijk revisits this argument by saying that in moving towards 'atheistic world projects' the Enlightenment replicated religion and 'released an immanent zealotry that – because it was incapable of grace – even surpassed the religious variety in strictness, anger and violence' (Sloterdijk, 2010, p. 136). It could be that this psychological tradition can explain how the New Atheists have, in rejecting violence, become apologists for violence.

Thirdly, a more historically situated explanation is advanced by William Cavanaugh in his book *The Myth of Religious Violence* (2009). Drawing on historical sociology, he argues that 'religion' is a recent analytical category that appeared with the rise of the modern state. The 'myth' is that there is a transhistorical, trans-cultural feature of human life called 'religion' which is essentially distinct from the 'secular' political sphere. The depiction of 'religion' as inherently prone to violence is one of the 'foundational

legitimizing myths of the liberal nation-state,' which sets itself up as the rational, peace-making subject which must use force to tame the fanatical and irrational religious Other. This myth is used to reconfigure power by marginalising certain groups (especially Muslims) and underwrite the monopoly of the state to exercise violence. In this narrative, because Muslims have not learnt to remove the dangerous influence of religion from public life, 'their violence is therefore irrational and fanatical' whereas ours, being secular, 'is rational, peace-making and sometimes regrettably necessary.' We find ourselves 'obliged to bomb them into liberal democracy' (Cavanaugh, 2009, pp. 3–4).

This would appear an apt explanation of the position of the New Atheists who, Cavanaugh contends, are classic examples of the uncritical espousal of the myth of religious violence. They work with a simple dichotomy of religion = violence and atheism = peace, and interpret all data to fit this assumption. Thus in *The God Delusion* Dawkins interprets all violence done by 'religious' people as proceeding inexorably from their religion, whereas atheism is entirely incidental to the violence of atheist regimes such as the USSR: 'why would anyone go to war for the sake of an absence of belief?' he quips incredulously (Dawkins, 2007, p. 316). In similar sophistry, Hitchens decries apparently religious people who do not advocate violence as, for Hitchens, they are not really religious. As Cavanaugh observes, 'Religion poisons everything because Hitchens identifies everything poisonous as religious' (Dawkins, 2007, p. 218). For Hitchens, therefore, 'The problem with religion is that it kills for the wrong reasons,' whereas killing for atheism is not only right but pleasing (Cavanaugh, 2009). The New Atheists end up advocating violence not because atheism is inherently violent, but because their version leads them to an uncritical invocation of the Myth of Religious Violence.

Finally, a fourth explanation is that as a philosophy which emerged in reaction to Western monotheism, atheism is as tainted by violence as theistic belief systems. This argument is made by theologians who suggest that by eliminating the ideas both of binding moral laws provided by a creator, and of humans as sacred beings made in God's image, atheism eliminates inherent restraints on violence (see McGrath, 2005). By this argument, atheism has an intrinsic tendency to violence. However, it is important to note that although these writers' variants of atheism structure geopolitical visions that led them to endorse violence, it is not possible to generalise from them about 'atheism' as a whole. New Atheism is not representative of all atheists, any more than the death-cult of Daesh or the homophobes of the Westboro Baptist Church represent all Muslims or all Christians respectively. Nevertheless they indicate the continuation of an Orientalist binary and geographies that are not only imaginative, but nightmarish in their division of the world into territorially-bound moral absolutes. Further research is needed on the place of different ideas and region-specific practices of atheism in fostering geopolitical visions that are productive of violence or of peace.

We finish by reiterating our argument that such research is the proper task of critical geopolitical enquiry. The designation of parts of the world as dangerous spaces populated by dangerous people who believe dangerous things which therefore requires the policy response of war on the part of enlightened people who inhabit more advanced spaces, continues to act as an incitement to violence. The task of Critical Geopolitics remains that of understanding and challenging these militaristic mappings, and explicating alternative geographies of the world that are productive of more pacific ways of living together. There is room within this enterprise for a diversity of theoretical approaches and methods. Nor should we lose sight of the truth that Critical Geopolitics is, like all scientific endeavour, a collaborative project: depending upon abilities, inclinations, positions and opportunities, it is perfectly

acceptable for different scholars to make very different contributions to this field. Indeed, we think it is enriched by this very diversity.

For example, 'New Atheist' online communities have come into being and offer what McGrath describes as "a sense of shared identity and solidarity" (McGrath, 2005, p. 26). The analysis that we provide is a necessary starting point, but we recognise that it is an insufficient exploration of the New Atheist phenomenon in the absence of 'audience studies' work on these communities along the lines of that suggested by Dittmer and Gray (2010). That is beyond the scope of this paper, but we hope that our initial foray will lead to further research into this area.

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