

Introduction

This is a story about Protestantism. It is a story about the attempt to find a new foundation for the Christian faith apart from the authority and tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, and the instabilities and contradictions that arose from it. The thesis of this work is that these tensions and contradictions gave rise – in the fullness of time – to two opposing, yet related, forms of thought: Protestant fundamentalism and new atheism.

This work began as an attempt to determine whether comparisons between fundamentalism and new atheism were cogent. Investigation revealed that these comparisons, far from being superficial, arose from deep similarities in structure between the two groups. Yet investigation also revealed that these similarities rest upon two shared presuppositions, presuppositions whose intellectual and social genealogy stretches back to the Reformation in England. In order to provide a complete answer to the question of the relation of fundamentalism to new atheism, then, it became necessary to integrate analysis of their contemporary structure with a genealogy of the presuppositions that gave rise to it. The two related questions that this work attempts to answer, therefore, are these: first, what common historical and theological root do new atheist and Protestant fundamentalist thought come from, and, second, how does this common root, and the presuppositions that arise from it, structure their thought? In answering these questions, the following argument will be advanced: that new atheist and Protestant fundamentalist thought is structured by the presupposition of a literal, univocal and perspicuous Scripture, and the presupposition that divine activity disrupts and substitutes for natural causation, beliefs that have arisen from a common historical root.

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A number of commentators have made comparisons between new atheism and fundamentalism. Armstrong, Beattie, de Botton, Vernon, Cunningham, Robertson and Eagleton, *inter alia*, have all noted resemblances between the two groups.¹ Nevertheless, the existing literature on the subject of new atheism and fundamentalism suffers from three related failures. First, the majority of these remarks are made in polemical and popular works directed to attacking the social and intellectual standing of new atheism. For this reason, comparisons with fundamentalism could be rejected outright as being little more than insults. This failing is joined by a second, the occasional nature of the existing literature. Most of these comparisons are made in passing, and when more detail is given, it is generally not supported with sustained argument. These problems are compounded by a third factor, the serious neglect of atheism as a subject for theological investigation. Although the profile of atheism in the public life of Britain and America is greater than ever, and the publishing opportunities available for atheist and anti-atheist writers unparalleled, the majority of academic engagements with atheism are in the form of polemical works written by academic theologians.² This has two unfortunate consequences. First, it represents a failure of academic theology to fully address a serious social, political and intellectual challenge to the Church and the Christian faith, as polemical works are not suitable for the detail and depth of analysis necessary to critique the origins, structure and arguments of new atheism. As Hyman notes, the lack of serious research into the origins and structure of atheism mean that its nature and true significance are apt to be misunderstood.³ The polemical nature of the existing theological engagement with atheism leads, second, to the impression that atheism is merely a ‘popular’ subject, and beneath the

¹ Alain De Botton, *Religion for Atheists* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012), 12; Mark Vernon, *After Atheism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 4, 7, 55–6; David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 4, 231–2; David Robertson, *The Dawkins Letters* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2010), 78–83; Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God* (London: Vintage Books, 2010), 290; Terry Eagleton, *God, Faith, and Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 53; Conor Cunningham, *Darwin’s Pious Idea* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), xi; Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2007), 4; Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 2.

² E.g. Alistair McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion?* (London: SPCK, 2007); Keith Ward, *Why There Almost Certainly Is a God* (Oxford: Lion Books, 2008); John F. Haught, *God and the New Atheism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008). Also see John Hughes ed., *The Unknown God* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013).

³ Gavin Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), ix–x.

attention of serious theologians. This is doubly unfortunate, for not only does it further stigmatise theological investigation of a prevalent intellectual, political and pastoral issue, but, as the present work shall reveal, prohibits investigation of the serious tensions and contradictions within Protestant theology which gave, and continue to give rise, to atheism.

There are, however, exceptions to this judgement. Michael Buckley's *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* began the contemporary academic study of atheism, arguing that atheism, contrary to popular opinion, did not arise from an independent, non-Christian source, but from within Christianity itself, and the natural-theological arguments advanced by the Church to defend its core doctrines.⁴ The thesis of a theological origin for atheism was continued by Alan Kors in *Atheism in France 1650–1729: The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief*, which demonstrated how intra-ecclesial debates concerning natural theology and philosophy generated arguments later used by atheists.⁵ A similar story was told by Turner, who in *Without God, Without Creed* charted the way in which American Christianity became assimilated to secular forms of thought, and became alienated from its own distinctive beliefs and patterns of reasoning.⁶ Drawing upon the dependence thesis concerning the theological origins of atheism, yet focusing upon the doctrine of God, Gavin Hyman has recently advanced the argument that changes in late medieval theology laid the foundations for atheism by endangering God's transcendence, and re-conceptualising God's being as merely the highest among other beings.⁷ Reduced to an object within the universe, it was then easy for science to reject God's existence. This 'modern' conception of God is passing away, however, and Hyman foresees a corresponding change in the nature of Western atheism. Another recent academic work that has engaged seriously with atheism, while also making connections between it and fundamentalism, is Conor Cunningham's *Darwin's Pious Idea*. Cunningham's work uncovers the agreement between ultra-Darwinists and creationists on the anti-religious import of evolution, yet argues that their shared conception of evolution is faulty, and that a correct conception of evolution by natural selection is compatible with faith.

⁴ Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

⁵ Alan C. Kors, *Atheism in France 1650–1729* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

⁶ James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

⁷ Hyman, *Short History*, 47–80.

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In the last few years, two other works exploring the theological implications of unbelief have also appeared. Although not an academic work – and hence not explicitly addressing the existing literature – Nick Spencer’s *Atheists: The Origin of the Species* offered a partial history of the development of British atheism from the late seventeenth century to the twentieth, and offers a number of important insights that parallel my own conclusions.⁸ Dominic Erdozain’s *The Soul of Doubt* is similar to the works listed previously in arguing for a religious origin for atheism, yet traces this origin less to specific ideas than the inculcation of *conscience* among European thinkers, a development that led increasing numbers of educated people to question biblical morality, and reject the faith.⁹

The present work draws upon this earlier research by defending the argument that atheism in Britain and America had a theological origin, yet differs from it by proceeding with an alternative methodology, and a different estimation of the factors involved. First, one feature of all of these works is the relative absence of discussion concerning the importance of biblical hermeneutics. The overwhelming emphasis is on natural theology and science, which, while of the utmost importance, cannot fully be separated from the scriptural interpretations they were tasked with explicating and protecting. This oversight is related to a second issue, the relative absence of discussion concerning the Reformation and its aftermath. While Turner undertakes discussion of Reformed theology, its focus is more upon New England puritanism than the salient theological changes that made puritanism possible. Turner’s work also suffers from a certain diffuseness, as his – relatively short – history attempts to outline *every* reason for American unbelief. The third difference between this and earlier works comes in the relation of history to our contemporary context. All of the foregoing works, with the exception of Hyman’s introductory text, focus on either history or the contemporary debate, so that the insights from one area of enquiry are not brought to bear upon the other.

This work remedies these oversights in a number of ways. First, it focuses on both biblical hermeneutics *and* science and natural theology, and stresses their interrelatedness. Second, it pushes back the origins of British and American atheism to the English Reformation. Third, it relates the historical to the contemporary, stressing the continuities between

⁸ Nick Spencer, *Atheists: The Origin of the Species* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2014).

⁹ Dominic Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

contemporary atheism and its theological origins. The fourth – and greatest – contrast with earlier works, however, is that I argue that the same biblical and natural-theological problems that generated atheism *also* gave rise to Protestant fundamentalism, and that this common heritage gives rise to a similar intellectual structure in both groups. Central to this is the identification of two presuppositions foundational to both Protestant fundamentalism and new atheism in Britain and America: a literal, univocal, and perspicuous understanding of Scripture, and a disruptive and substitutionary account of divine activity in nature.

The method that structures this work, and makes such an extensive analysis possible, is adapted from R. G. Collingwood, and may be characterised as textual, genealogical and analytic.¹⁰ This method minimises three potential difficulties in carrying out a work of this kind. The first potential difficulty is historical. A historical account of the origins of atheism and Protestant fundamentalism in Britain and America would require a multi-volume work, leaving little room for critical engagement with their contemporary forms. The present work does not attempt to provide a history of the origins of atheism and fundamentalism in Britain and America, but only a genealogy of two key presuppositions that structure them, and which played an important part in their genesis. It is not argued that these presuppositions exhaust all the causal factors that contributed to the development of atheism and fundamentalism. As we shall see, a wide range of intellectual and social factors were implicated. Rather, it is argued that these presuppositions played a particularly important role in their development, and continue to play an important intellectual function in their contemporary forms. Historical discussion is undertaken only to explain the origin or development of these presuppositions, or to show their effect in different time periods. The latter is of equal importance to the former, for I argue that these presuppositions have been unstable throughout history, and continually give rise to their own negation. Furthermore, the strategies used to stabilise them are equally unstable, or inadvertently contradict the presuppositions they are employed to protect.

Even when qualifications are stated, however, the genealogical approach used in this work may prove unsatisfactory to some, a dissatisfaction aroused by the wide timescale that is surveyed. Yet as Brad Gregory has recently argued, if historical investigation is confined to the

¹⁰ See Robert G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

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life of one individual or one narrow timeframe then analysis of intellectual development and long-term trends becomes impossible. We are then robbed of important historical insights that can illuminate the present.¹¹ To echo Peter Harrison, while there are many ways of doing history, to the extent that they are governed by reasonable arguments and sound evidence they are worthy of our attention and serious engagement.¹²

The second difficulty that a genealogical method avoids is that of decontextualisation in the study of atheism. This approach is advanced against two groups. First are those such as Peter Gay and contemporary new atheist writers, who argue for the origins of atheism in science or secular philosophy, and who trace its history back to eighteenth-century France.¹³ Second, it is advanced against writers such as David Berman and James Thrower who attempt to provide isolated histories of atheism, as if there has always been an anti-Christian tradition running independently of Christian tradition, and that the beliefs of Greek philosophers and seventeenth-century English peasants could be brought under a single category.¹⁴ These assumptions can distort the questions we ask and the investigations we undertake, leading us to overlook national contexts, and the dominance of religion even in a reputedly religionless Enlightenment.¹⁵

The danger of decontextualisation is related to a third potential problem that the method adopted in this work minimises: the danger of conflating historical contingency with logical necessity. This potential difficulty has two aspects. First, in tracing the genealogy of the two presuppositions that form the primary basis of new atheist and Protestant fundamentalist thought, it is not argued that atheism or fundamentalism follow *necessarily* from Protestantism. Rather, it is argued that, under a range of contingent social, political and intellectual conditions, certain presuppositions established between the Reformation and Restoration came to play an important role in atheist and fundamentalist thought.

¹¹ Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 3–5.

¹² Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2015), 185.

¹³ E.g. Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York: Knopf, 1966–1969).

¹⁴ James Thrower, *Western Atheism* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2000); David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain* (London: Crook Helm, 1988).

¹⁵ Cf. B. W. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 1–2.

The second aspect of this potential difficulty relates to the ‘Protestant Reformation’ referred to in this work’s title. The genealogical method adopted in this work does not pretend that all forms of Protestantism from the Reformation to the present day are structured by a literal, univocal and perspicuous understanding of Scripture, or a disruptive and substitutionary understanding of divine activity. All that is argued is that these presuppositions were present within a significant section of Protestant thought in Britain and America, and that, at various times, they held popular sway. Protestantism, in this regard, is wider than professional Protestant theology and encompasses a range of popular beliefs and practices. Just as the Lord left a remnant in Israel during the days of Elijah that did not bend the knee to Baal, so there has always been a remnant – sometimes greater, sometimes weaker – that refused to give these presuppositions the honour others thought due to them.

While the method adopted in this work minimises a number of potential difficulties, there remains the question of how to define atheism and fundamentalism themselves, and the related question of which texts to examine. We can find an avenue into this question by considering Stephen Bullivant’s views in the *Oxford Handbook on Atheism*. As Bullivant says, ‘The precise definition of atheism is both a vexed and vexatious question’ and ‘Atheism simply possesses no single, objective, definition.’¹⁶ In spite of these observations, Bullivant comes to adopt a working definition of atheism as the absence of belief in God or gods, as well as ruling out other conceptions that would posit a dependence of atheism upon religion:

Certainly, there is some truth to this claim . . . But the fact that prevailing theisms condition the focus and expression of certain kinds of atheism, does not mean that either they or atheism in general have no wider referent.¹⁷

Bullivant’s views stand in contrast to those of Buckley:

Atheism is essentially parasitic . . . atheism depends upon theism for its vocabulary, for its meaning, and for the hypothesis it rejects.¹⁸

We have here two different conceptions of atheism: the simple absence of belief in God or gods, or a parasitic movement that is dependent upon the religion it rejects. It is instructive to recall that these competing conceptions are advanced by a sociologist and an historian respectively. If we

¹⁶ Stephen Bullivant, ‘Defining “Atheism”’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11, 12.

¹⁷ Bullivant, ‘Defining “Atheism”’, 18. ¹⁸ Buckley, *Origins*, 15.

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bracket historical considerations, and look only at the current intellectual and social manifestations of atheism, Bullivant's definition is plausible. Atheists have their own physical and online communities, their own particular worldview, and they engage in a range of social practices that mark them out from others. In this sense, they are as substantial and 'positive' as any other group. Yet when one comes to ask *why* they hold the beliefs they do, looking not only to their current social form but examining their historical origins, one very quickly comes to realise that Buckley's dependence thesis is more plausible. As we shall see, at every turn, atheism and anti-Christian thought in Britain and America have been dependent for their motivation, methods, arguments, vocabulary, categories and social and political form upon the Christianity they reject. In spite of this, Bullivant's definition is helpful when we turn to the present-day context, for it encourages us not to seek a theological explanation for atheist or anti-Christian beliefs too readily. For that reason, I attempt to assess atheist arguments on their own terms, paying close attention to the self-understanding of the texts surveyed.

While this work advances a dependence model of atheism in general, there remains a more specific issue regarding the definition of *new* atheism. In spite of the wide use of the phrase, and the multitude of works seeking to defend or attack it, Zenk has urged scholars to refrain from use of the term:

By using the label 'New Atheism', several individuals are subsumed under one unifying concept, thereby implying a uniform phenomenon . . . there is simply no programme or manifesto of 'New Atheism' and there is no all-embracing organization, in which all, or even most, of the so-labelled persons are united.¹⁹

Zenk's approach to atheism is similar to Bullivant's, yet takes a negative form. Like Bullivant, Zenk is concerned to find a positive definition for atheism, yet, failing to find such a definition, he urges scholars to refrain from using a term that suggests that such a definition exists. Yet the existence of a spate of popular anti-Christian texts, written in English since the early years of the new millennium, is a fact, as is the labelling of these texts as 'new atheist'. While Zenk claims to find 'more differences than similarities' in these texts, as we shall see, the textual evidence to the contrary is so great that it is difficult to see how Zenk can hold this view.²⁰

¹⁹ Thomas Zenk, 'New Atheism', in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 255.

²⁰ Zenk, 'New Atheism', 255.

Nevertheless, Zenk presents a helpful warning for scholars not to see connections where there are none. In particular, he reminds us that not all new atheist writers claim to be atheists. For the purposes of this work, however, this observation is not particularly important. First, the results of the genealogical method adopted in this work make it clear that British and American atheism – as a historically contingent and theologically dependent phenomenon – possess a fluid nature, sometimes resembling an extreme form of Protestantism while at other times resembling something that stands over and against Protestantism, and, indeed, Christianity itself. This is not a failing of scholarship, but the scholarly recognition of what is a complex social and intellectual phenomenon. Second, I do not seek to address the issue of whether new atheist texts are truly ‘atheist’ or not, but only whether the range of texts called ‘new atheist’ have similarities with Protestant fundamentalist texts, and, if so, why this is the case. For this reason, the selection of texts is not dependent upon them meeting a certain definition of ‘atheist’ but upon the far more modest criterion of being popular anti-Christian works written in English since the millennium. The only addendum to this criterion is that occasional reference will be made to earlier texts by new atheist authors such as Richard Dawkins, or, less commonly, other texts that have been particularly influential on new atheist writers. Such works can help illuminate the current phenomenon of new atheism.

Analogous difficulties, however, attend the definition of ‘fundamentalist’. Recent decades have witnessed a great expansion in the quantity of literature on fundamentalism, and a corresponding increase in the range of phenomena labelled as such. This trend reached its climax in *The Fundamentalism Project* of Martin Marty and Scott Appleby, which examined fundamentalism as a global phenomenon, encompassing a range of diverse religions, practices and beliefs.²¹ The use of the word ‘fundamentalist’ is, however, deeply problematic, as there is no agreement on its definition.²² As Partridge and Ruthven note, in practice, it is sometimes little more than a term of abuse, used by culturally dominant groups within Western society to label other groups they view as socially

²¹ Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *The Fundamentalism Project* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993–1995).

²² Kathleen C. Boone, *The Bible Tells Them So* (Albany: State University of New York, 1989), 7–8.

undesirable.²³ It is a ‘receptacle for socially undesirable qualities,’ an ‘intolerant epithet for those we regard as intolerant ... a label that immediately delegitimizes’.²⁴ The difficulties are particularly great when the term is used to describe communities and social phenomena very different from the conservative evangelical culture in which it originated. While factors such as exclusivity, foundationalism and antipathy to the core narratives of other groups serve as useful criteria for the application of the term, it is better to speak of *fundamentalisms* rather than *fundamentalism*, and any researcher must be attentive to the particular historical and social context of the phenomena they are studying.²⁵

The current work navigates these difficulties in two ways. First, it examines the form of fundamentalism that gave its name to all others: conservative Protestantism. Importantly, the use of the word ‘fundamentalist’ was first used by members of this group to describe their own beliefs and was not meant pejoratively. For this reason, it is a *native* term, and not imposed upon the material in an arbitrary manner. Second, this study deploys the term in a very specific way. There are two methods that one might adopt when investigating the relation between Protestant fundamentalist and new atheist thought. The most common would be to begin with a set of criteria for ‘fundamentalism’, and then compare each form of thought with it to discern whether they are, or are not, ‘fundamentalist’. Alternatively, one might compare new atheist and Protestant fundamentalist texts, and consider their similarities. It is the latter method that is adopted in this work. In doing so, much of the difficulty in defining and limiting the term ‘fundamentalism’ is avoided, and the discussion is given a textual specificity that militates against abstraction and generality.

Nevertheless, while the term ‘fundamentalist’ is native to conservative Protestantism, there are many different kinds of conservative Protestantism, and reference to every work by conservative Protestants would be unfeasible. For this reason, the majority of Protestant fundamentalist texts examined are from the Reformed tradition, including those strands

²³ Christopher H. Partridge, ‘Introduction’ in *Fundamentalisms* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), xiv; Malise Ruthven, *Fundamentalism: The Search for Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6–7.

²⁴ Sara Savage, ‘A Psychology of Fundamentalism’, in *Fundamentalism: Church and Society*, edited by Martyn Percy and Ian Jones (London: SPCK, 2002), 31; Mark Juergensmeyer, ‘The Debate over Hindutva’, *Religion* 26, no. 2 (1996): 130.

²⁵ Harriet A. Harris ‘How Helpful is the Term “Fundamentalist”?’, in *Fundamentalisms*, ed. Christopher H. Partridge (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 14–16; Partridge, ‘Introduction’, xvi.

of the Baptist tradition that have been most influenced by Reformed theology. In this way, Pentecostal texts – which may also conceivably be called ‘fundamentalist’ – have not been examined. Even with this limitation, however, the range of possible texts for examination would still be too great. For the purposes of this work, therefore, investigation has been limited to English-language works produced since the late 1960s – when the seminal *Genesis Flood* was produced – with particular attention directed towards texts that oppose evolution. The reason for a focus upon evolution is threefold. First, it is the issue of evolution around which fundamentalist opposition to contemporary social and intellectual norms has crystallised. Second, it is upon the issue of evolution that the similarities and differences between new atheists and Protestant fundamentalists become most clear. Third, it is the debate between atheists and fundamentalists over the issue of evolution that has received most attention from commentators. A focus upon this issue therefore allows engagement with an existing corpus of literature.

Focus upon Protestant fundamentalist texts that oppose evolution, however, raises two further issues that require comment. First, it might be objected that the focus of this work should not be upon Protestant fundamentalism but *six-day creationism*. While understandable, this argument is misguided for historical, logical and social reasons. Historically, six-day creationism does not have an independent genealogy from Protestant fundamentalism. For a work employing a genealogical method, this is a decisive consideration. The argument also fails on logical grounds. Six-day creationism is unintelligible without a belief in scriptural inerrancy and a preference for a literal, univocal and perspicuous understanding of the biblical text. It is dependent upon such Protestant fundamentalist beliefs for its existence. Lastly, the argument fails for social reasons. Creationists do not form a separate community from other Protestant fundamentalists. There are not, for example, special six-day creationist churches that only preach on six-day creationist themes. The illusion that six-day creationism is a separate intellectual and social phenomenon is created by the existence of Protestant fundamentalist ministries established to demonstrate the scientific accuracy of a literal reading of Genesis 1–3. Notwithstanding, there is a second issue concerning the choice of anti-evolutionary works. Occasional reference is made in what follows to the work of intelligent design theorist Philip E. Johnson. While there are important differences between six-day creationism and intelligent design theory, the more conservative and philosophical of intelligent design theorists – like Johnson – share almost exactly the same

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philosophy of science as six-day creationists do, and there is now an increasing cross-pollination occurring between the two, with creationists adopting many arguments that first arose with Johnson. Occasional reference to intelligent design theory can therefore be used to illuminate certain features of Protestant fundamentalist thought.

With these methodological considerations complete, we turn now to the structure of the following work. It is divided into five chapters, with Chapters 1–3 tracing the genealogy and historic effects of the key presuppositions of new atheist and Protestant fundamentalist thought. Chapters 4 and 5 then examine the way in which these presuppositions continue to structure each form of thought, and the problems that attend them.

Chapter 1 examines how the English Reformation and its aftermath generated presuppositions and oppositions that gave rise to the first anti-Christian forms of thought in British history. By assaulting the authority and tradition of the Roman Catholic Church with the principles of *sola scriptura* and *sola fide*, the reformers set in motion a crisis of authority, a dialectic within Protestant thought that would see the polemical weaponry wielded by Protestants against their theological adversaries being used, in turn, to undermine the position of the Church of England. This crisis of authority resulted in a proliferation of heterodox and anti-Christian sects during the Civil War. The Restoration Church, seeking to inhibit the caustic effects of *sola scriptura* and *sola fide*, adopted a robust literalism, yet one grounded in reason rather than theological tradition. This strategy reached its apogee in the philosophy of John Locke, who manifested and furthered the philosophical and theological trends of his time. Unfortunately, this strategy backfired, giving rise to the first freethinkers, who, looking to Scripture alone, and adopting the new robust literalism, questioned the authority of Scripture. The growth of freethought was temporarily averted, however, by the promotion of natural theology, which wed theology to the burgeoning sciences, and made a disruptive and substitutionary understanding of divine activity in nature a vital component of cosmology, physics and biology. Yet this had the effect of making divine activity one cause among others, so that the customary distinction between primary and secondary causation – and the related notion of general concurrence – became largely redundant in relation to the question of origins, as well as certain aspects of preservation. At the end of these developments, the presuppositions foundational to new atheist and Protestant fundamentalist had crystallised: a literal, univocal and

perspicuous understanding of Scripture, and a belief that divine activity in nature substituted for or disrupted natural causation.

Chapter 2 charts the way in which these presuppositions were placed under increasing strain in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British society, before inverting themselves and coming to be held negatively, thereby giving rise to anti-Christian and atheist forms of thought. The rise of evangelicalism brought large numbers of poor, uneducated Britons into the practice of unaided Bible reading for the first time, with the majority joining nonconformist churches. Yet, having rejected theological tradition to a greater extent than Anglicans, nonconformists lacked the theological apparatus needed to harmonise apparent inaccuracies and contradictions within Scripture. When such contradictions and inaccuracies were found, the result was sometimes the abandonment of faith, and the adoption of a militant atheism that mirrored the literalism and anti-Establishment ideology of the dissenting denominations. Whereas natural theology had previously provided an alternative justification for faith, the discoveries of geology and biology, added to existing forms of literalism, did irreparable damage to the hermeneutical and natural-theological synthesis established at the Restoration, thereby claiming an increasing number of middle- and upper-class Anglicans for agnosticism and atheism. While these groups may have lost their faith, however, they retained many of its presuppositions regarding Scripture, divine activity, and the capacity of science to help or harm faith, presuppositions that would be later be transmitted to new atheist thought.

Chapter 3 turns to the genealogy of Protestant fundamentalism, and how the presuppositions of a literal, univocal and perspicuous Scripture and the disruptive and substitutionary nature of divine activity were given new emphases through the adoption of Scottish Common Sense philosophy by American theologians. While the philosophy of Thomas Reid arose as a reaction against the development of Locke's philosophy by David Hume, Reid actually *strengthened* the connection between knowledge with immediate consciousness, thereby reinforcing a tendency already found within Locke. This gave rise to an inductive method in theology and the sciences known as 'Baconianism', which rejected hypotheses and theories in the construction of knowledge. When radicalised by war and unprecedented social upheaval, this ideology would enable large numbers of Americans to view evolution and biblical criticism as unscientific, irrational and socially pernicious. These developments resulted in a breach between conservative evangelicals and

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contemporary thought, thereby laying the foundations for contemporary Protestant fundamentalism.

Chapter 4 brings us to the present day and uncovers the secret sympathy that exists between new atheist and Protestant fundamentalist thought. While, at first sight, it appears that these forms of thought are utterly unrelated, analysis reveals that they share the same intellectual and social structure, one that arises from their inheritance of the presuppositions of a literal, univocal and perspicuous Scripture, and the belief that divine activity in nature disrupts and substitutes for natural causation. These presuppositions give rise to a common conception of Scripture and biblical hermeneutics, the belief that evolution disproves faith, the rejection of postmodernity and a dismissive attitude towards non-fundamentalist Christians. These beliefs, and the presuppositions that ground them, arise from each group's shared theological and historical roots in Protestantism, a Protestantism that, in the face of scientific advances and social change, has now broken apart into two opposing forms, opposing forms that, paradoxically, share the same structure, and are mutually reinforcing.

Chapter 5 completes the work and argues that the presuppositions that structure new atheist and Protestant fundamentalist thought are intrinsically unstable. The beliefs and strategies used to stabilise them, moreover, contradict their foundational presuppositions, rendering each form of thought self-contradictory. The chapter concludes with a recapitulation of the genealogy of Chapters 1–3, and its integration with the analysis of Chapter 4.

In course of advancing its primary argument, this work reaches a number of important conclusions regarding atheism, fundamentalism and the structure of Protestant thought in Britain and America, conclusions that call for new kinds of theological and historical enquiry. First, it will be demonstrated that, while lacking detail, popular comparisons between new atheists and Protestant fundamentalists are cogent. Second, it will be shown that atheism in Britain and America grew out of problems within Protestantism. This discovery undermines a range of academic and new atheist authors who see no such connection, or who vehemently deny any historical dependence of atheism upon Christianity. Third, it will be shown that Protestant fundamentalism was itself a response to the same train of problems that gave rise to atheism. Fourth, it will be shown that new atheism is not an areligious movement but an atheological one, which finds it necessary to engage in the task of theology in order to reject the existence of God and the truth of the Christian faith. Fifth, this

study casts doubt on the self-understanding of both Protestant fundamentalism and new atheism. It shows that Protestant fundamentalism is not properly biblical, nor new atheism scientific, and that both are heavily indebted to presuppositions that neither can properly justify, and which render both self-contradictory.

In addition to these substantive contributions to scholarship, the diagnosis of problems and tensions within Protestant – and in particular Reformed – theology in Britain and America makes the study programmatic, and provides a basis for future academic study. First, it highlights a number of areas which ecclesiastical historians should examine further in order to understand the genesis of atheism. Second, it raises awareness of areas of Protestant theology that stand in need of repair by systematic theologians, especially when these continue to inform contemporary thought. The need for such work is pressing, and it is the hope of this work that, if nothing else, further research will be carried out to diagnose and repair the theological problems that engender atheism, and which continue to structure much of the Church's practice and proclamation.

With these introductory remarks complete, we begin our story.