

THESIS

THE NEW ATHEIST MOVEMENT IN THE BLOGOSPHERE:
BURLESQUE AND CARNIVALESQUE AS RHETORICAL STRATEGIES IN VISUAL
PRODUCTIONS

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Summer 2013

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ABSTRACT

THE NEW ATHEIST MOVEMENT IN THE BLOGOSPHERE: BURLESQUE AND CARNIVALESQUE AS RHETORICAL STRATEGIES IN VISUAL PRODUCTIONS

This thesis examines the visual production of the New Atheist Movement in the Blogosphere. I argue that the images of New Atheism use burlesque and carnivalesque as rhetorical strategies. In the public sphere, New Atheist movement use burlesque images to criticize the majority religion in the U.S. by critiquing the power dynamic between religion and humanity. The atheists also criticize the contemporary relevance of religious attitudes and offer an alternative perspective focusing on human empowerment, science, and technology. Meanwhile, the carnivalesque images function to uncover the problematic social discourse from the atheistic point of view and the alternative perspectives offered by atheism. The carnivalesque approach helps to smooth the promotion of the atheists' main premise, challenge the dominant premise, and desanctify hierarchy through laughter. The analysis on this paper is not only identifying burlesque and carnivalesque strategies of images in the blogosphere, but also to contribute to the understanding of how symbols function in religious discourse in the U.S. I conclude the project by examining that in atheists' (digital) enclaves, they build their subaltern identity and then expand into the broader public sphere, seeking points of connection between themselves and theists.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Spaces preclude properly acknowledging everybody who has had an impact on this project. Nonetheless, there are a few individuals to whom I owe a great depth of gratitude. First, this project would not be finished without the work of my committee. I want to thank Dr. Karrin Vasby Anderson; your work and patience on this project was beyond my expectations of a chair. You have supported me to be a better student, writer, and future scholar. I will not forget your help in developing my research while providing a much needed understanding, patient, and caring hand. You are a brilliant scholar, magnificent teacher, and wonderful woman. Dr. Hye Seung Chung, for your input, comments, and expediency in helping me to understand the religious discourse in the US. More importantly, I thoroughly appreciated your perspectives on the importance of contribution of my paper to mass media especially the dynamics of the blogosphere. My outside member, Dr. Jeff Kasser, thank you for your valuable insight in understanding the logic of atheism and theism debates. Your evaluation on the details of my analysis helps me to understand the effective use of language and important terms.

Dr. David Diffrient, for your first support when I came up with the idea of Godless America. Your wonderful help through your brilliant works and your patient to help me as an International student really help me to push my class paper to a thesis project.

I also must thank my dearest partner Franciscus Xaverius Gilang Ahmad Fauzi for your outstanding supports. Your encouragement through proofreading and editing is really useful for this project. Not to mention, your patient to wait for me to finish my Master and your emotional support is a motivation for me to survive in USA. I thank God for giving me your support and look forward to a wonderful life together.

Linda and John Mahan for your support to my thesis project. Linda is not only a brilliant and adventurous host mother but also a great discussion partner for my thesis. Your help in proofreading really help me to make this project clean and clear, due to my limitation as a non-Native speaker.

Versha Anderson, you are a very awesome classmate. Thank you for helping me by doing peer-review to my project in your busy time. My entire classmates who help me to review my thesis project along the way through Public Address class and Media Theory class, Department of Communication Studies, Colorado State University. Sarah Peterson for your discussion support and your review on my class projects, thank you so much.

I must thank to my parents, Bernardus Widiyanto and Catharina Murwani Rahayu, their guidance in difficult times is unending and go beyond-I love you, both! My academic discussion partner Dr. Gregoria Arum Yudarwati for your academic advice and mental support truly help me to finish this project.

I also would like to thank you to Fulbright scholarship, Institute of International Education, and University of Atma Jaya Yogyakarta for supporting my financial and immigration procedure in completing my thesis project. Finally I would like to thank to many friends in Colorado State University, especially The Blacksnow for your support in my academic career, Fulbright fellows for the interesting discussion on religion and politics, and many others. I am sure that there are many people I have forgotten in these acknowledgements, I sincerely apologize for the omission.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Understanding the concept of diversity can be a lifetime process for people, a government institution, an organization, and even a nation. Although the United States is one of the most prominent advanced democracies, diversity continues to pose challenges. One particularly divisive issue is the relationship between religious groups and non-religious groups.¹ In U.S. culture, Judeo-Christian values continue to dominate politics, interpretations of the U. S Constitution, education, culture, national identity, and public discourse.² However, what about the groups who are not in the dominant and singular public sphere related to beliefs and religion in the United States? What happens to those who have alternative religious views?

Non-Judeo Christian groups in the United States are marginalized. According to the American Religious Identification Survey, people who do not want to affiliate themselves with any religion and self-identify, instead, as atheist, agnostic, secular, humanist, or “the Nones,” increased from 8.1% in 1990 to 15% in 2008. However, this group remains stigmatized.³ According to research from the University of Minneapolis in 2006, atheists are America’s most distrusted minority. This research revealed that respondents rated atheists below Muslims, immigrants, gays, and lesbians; the respondents also associated atheism with moral indiscretions.⁴

I have chosen the label “New Atheist movement” to represent the atheist movement in the United States.⁵ From an etymological perspective, the term “atheism” came from a Greek word, *atheos*, which means to “deny the existence of gods.”⁶ In the 21st century, a “New Atheism” developed in the scholarly community, which uses rational argument to counter and to criticize religious group.⁷ The focus of the New Atheism is to advance secularism, especially in the United States.⁸ While the concept of New Atheism grows, the people who believe in this

concept gather in atheist organizations and create social movements to spread the discourse of atheism.

Mario Diani defines a “social movement” as “networks of informal interaction between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict on the basis of a shared collective identity.”⁹ Thus, the New Atheist movement could be described as a social movement since it consists of interaction between diverse individuals who share an atheist identity. The New Atheist movement also creates collective challenges to the dominant religious perspectives, organizes collective actions, and demonstrates solidarity within their group in mass media.¹⁰ Various publications such as best selling books, blogs, and advertisements appear as the tools to support the concept, theory, and movement of New Atheism.¹¹ Richard Dawkins compares the atheist movement to the gay rights movement a few decades ago.¹² He argues that the more people try to be honest that they are atheists, the more people get encouragement to “come out” as atheists. Thus, the New Atheist movement promotes the idea of (a) revealing one’s “authentic” atheist identity and (b) comforting those who feel uncertain and afraid to “come out” as an atheist.¹³ However, Tom Flynn also criticized that the New Atheist movement is not a “brand new” movement because these types of arguments have existed throughout history. What has changed, however, is the mass appeal of New Atheism in popular culture. Therefore, some people get their only exposure to atheist rhetoric through New Atheism.¹⁴ Following the arguments from Flynn, this thesis examined the perspective on atheism and theism as discussed by the “four horsemen” of New Atheism: Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens.¹⁵ Their perspectives, however, are both an oversimplification of the complicated issues and the fragmented population/identity of both atheists and theists; They fail to differentiate between, for

example, fundamentalists, evangelicals, agnostics, skeptic, the moderate religious believers who become the silent majority, intellectual theists, etc.¹⁶ Instead, the four horsemen present an adolescent version of atheism, one that ignores nuanced arguments on both sides of the controversy and fails to acknowledge the positive intellectual and moral contributions theists have made throughout history. This thesis examines the less nuanced rhetoric of New Atheism because of its mass appeal, however, I am fully conscious of the contributions that theists, atheists, agnostics, and others have made to the United States. My analysis examines the ways in which New Atheists disseminate their message in popular culture and their effort to make the atheist message easier to digest by wider public (of course compare to their predecessors or the “old” atheist philosophers such as Karl Marx, Michael Foucault, Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach, Frederick Nietzsche, etc).

The New Atheist movement community engages to send messages of “atheist good news” and seeks to perpetuate an idea of secularism.¹⁷ However, the message they send functions as a “counter message,” one that runs in opposition to the dominant ideology expressed through many Christians’ “God discourse.” The dominant message is Judeo-Christian in content and assumes that God exists. In contrast, the New Atheist movement disseminates counter messages that challenge the latter assumption and offer a different worldview--one that suggests that God does not exist.

As the use of social media has increased, the New Atheist movement has employed it to disseminate its counter missionary message.¹⁸ Blogging, in particular, has been a popular medium for dissemination of the New Atheist movement’s message. Bloggers can have freedom to communicate creatively with publics about their ideas and opinions even though they contradict the mainstream’s perceptions or opinions. Those who have similar or different points

of view can interact with each other to resist or negotiate the diverse opinions.¹⁹ Additionally, the New Atheist movement uses various visual productions as ways to grab audience attention in various blogs. However, scholarly analysis is needed to assess the intersection between the New Atheist movement, the blogosphere, and images. Most research about atheism concentrates on written words, arguments between believers and non-believers, and assessment of media texts;²⁰ however, research that discusses the visual imagery in the atheist movement is limited. Therefore, looking the visual components of the atheist movement would be an interesting perspective in examining the rhetorical strategies of the New Atheist movement. In the current *ocular centric* era, where much of human attention is dominated by the impulse to “see,” “observe,” “look,” and “watch,”²¹ critical analysis of images can be an important contribution to understanding the diverse perspectives in the growing community of New Atheist movement.

This thesis looks at the visual images produced in three atheist blogs: 1) *Atheist's Blog*, 2) *Atheist Comics*, and 3) *The Pantheos- Friendly Atheist*. These blogs are well-known exemplars of the New Atheist movement. My preliminary research has revealed that the rhetorical strategies of burlesque and carnivalesque emerge as the key strategies in various visual images from the atheist movement. Thus, this thesis examines visual images produced in the atheist blogosphere by identifying and assessing key metaphors present in texts that exhibit either burlesque or carnivalesque rhetorical strategies.

In this study, I assess the visual rhetoric of the New Atheist movement as it is expressed in the blogosphere. Specifically, I answer two questions. First, in what way does the New Atheist movement employ the rhetorical strategies of burlesque and carnivalesque in its visual resistance to dominant Judeo-Christian culture in the United States? Second, in what ways do these rhetorical strategies shape the identity of the New Atheist movement? By answering these two

questions, I hope to contribute to the discussion of how the New Atheist movement resists opposition and negotiates its identity visually in the realm of the blogosphere.

In the pages that follow, I lay the foundation upon which I build my study. First, I review relevant academic literature. Next, I outline my critical methodology. Finally, I provide a brief overview of chapters.

Literature Review

Burlesque and Carnavalesque

Kenneth Burke argues that humans view the world through frames of acceptance and rejection.²² Burke argues that the frame of acceptance is a positive perception of human life. He gives the example, “if you break your leg, thank God you didn’t break your neck.”²³ This frame views human activity as a friendly phenomenon. On the other hand, the frame of rejection is a “by-product” of the frame of acceptance.²⁴ The frame of rejection emphasizes the different perspectives and attitudes towards the symbol of domination, authority, and highlights a shift commitment to the symbol of power. These frames discursively construct human perception. Burke argues that the frames of perception prompt humans to produce symbolic frames, which represent human acceptance and rejection.²⁵ Those corresponding to frames of acceptance are epic, tragedy, and comedy (which includes carnivalesque). Those associated with frames of rejection are elegy, satire, burlesque, grotesque, and didactic.

Burke explains that the burlesque frame is designed to criticize other individuals and groups of people, not by challenging their argumentation, but by negatively caricaturing them. Edward C. Appel uses the words “excuse of dignity”²⁶ to explain the way in which burlesque criticizes the external behavior of the victims and amplifies their stupidity. Burke suggests that

the burlesque approach propagates social breakage and continues one's separation from his or her enemies.²⁷ Burlesque form tends to focus specifically on people and their social behaviors, creating "victims" or scapegoats.²⁸ Thus, burlesque is not only making fun of these behaviors but also exaggerating and humiliating the "victims."

Burlesque ignores the intention, motive, psyche, and situation that influence the target's attitude or behaviors. Instead, the rhetors select the external behavior of the target, create a logical conclusion by reducing the incongruity, and change an uncertainty to a definite proposition.²⁹ The rhetors become "greater" than the target and put the target in an unequal position. The heartlessness of the rhetors appears as ignorance towards the situation of the target. The old-fashioned thesis from the target can be transformed into a partial contemporary antithesis.³⁰ Finally, the burlesque approach does not demand an intimate relationship with the victims and it can lead to an eventual condemnation of the rhetors.³¹ Thus, burlesque appears as a rejection towards the symbol of the authority from the dominant group. However, not every visual production is meant to reject the symbol of authority; some visual approaches invite audiences to question established hierarchies. Burke calls that approach "carnavalesque."

Carnavalesque strategies attempt to conceptualize levels of hierarchies in alternate ways and sometimes neglect the settled structure.³² Stephen Gencarella Olbrys describes carnivalesque as "a turning of the world upside down."³³ Sobhi Al-Zobaidi asserts that carnivalesque is a "temporary experience, something that appears only to disappear, an acting out, or a forgery. Yet it is a forgery that is repeated and ritualized; a fictional escape from all abstractions and the indulgence of the body in earthly matters."³⁴ Carnavalesque strategies, then, introduce audience members to different perspectives than those to which they are habitually exposed.³⁵

Carnavalesque discourses function to release audience members from communal norms through a rhetorical work of art,³⁶ and to motivate people to resist symbols of power and authority.³⁷ Thus, carnivalesque rhetoric challenges hegemonic genres, ideologies, and symbols through laughter.³⁸ Consequently, its message is often ambiguous, challenging hierarchy and deconstructing dominant discourse.³⁹ Al-Zobaidi argues that through carnivalesque, people can have opinions on a phenomenon which would otherwise be considered taboo.⁴⁰ Thus, as Mikhail Bakhtin has argued, the carnival allows the audience to think freely about the world.⁴¹

Carnavalesque appeals, then, allow the rhetor to laugh and, through laughter, disrupt the social order. Bakhtin notes that, as a shared public experience, carnivalesque involves all participants, including the rhetor. Thus, whereas burlesque targets the individual, carnivalesque spoofs the community as a whole. Carnavalesque creates a space where critique and reconciliation are more possible than they may otherwise be in society.⁴² The rhetorical strategies of burlesque and carnivalesque discourses are deployed in the intersections of dominant and marginalized cultures that comprise the public sphere.

Visual Resistance and Rhetoric

Jurgen Habermas's concept of an idealized "public sphere," in which interests are bracketed and actors engage one another free from the constraints produced by uneven power relations, is highly contested in academe.⁴³ For example, Nancy Fraser argues that the singular notion of "public" in Habermas's analysis has neglected the minority.⁴⁴ Fraser proposed the concept of the counter public. Robert Asen contends that "counter publics as discursive entities emerge in a multiple public sphere through constellations of people, places, and topics."⁴⁵ Asen defines counter publics as those "formed by participants who recognize exclusions in wider public spheres and resolve to join to overcome these exclusions."⁴⁶

How does a counter public disseminate its message in the public sphere? Kevin Michael DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples argue that audiences often are drawn to “[i]mages over words, emotions over rationality, speed over reflection, distraction over deliberation, and slogans over arguments.”⁴⁷ Image is an important instrument to magnify events, issues, and relationships.⁴⁸ In his discussion of framing, Robert Entman explains that frames exert political influence over publics through mass media, promoting particular interpretations and evaluation of issues, events, and conflicts. Combinations of words and images function as mass mediated frames, making the cultural message more “*noticeable, understandable, memorable, and emotionally charged.*”⁴⁹ The resonance and magnitude of the message can perpetuate similar interpretations and understandings to the audience. The concept of resonance and magnitude is similar to the idea of “optical regimes.”⁵⁰ Images can deliver a visual experience and create a subject position that shapes audience perceptions.⁵¹

Since the classical era, rhetoricians have argued that images can impact an audience’s perceptions and judgment. For example, the pre-renaissance period emphasized the use of visual objects to confirm the presence of power. In the churches such as Basilica St. Peter in the Vatican, frescos and wall paintings, dialogue liturgies, and celebration all provided visual evidence of the church’s power to demand, validate, judge, even convey identity upon those who lived in the surrounding area.⁵² Currently, the growth of technology and public interaction has focused on optical power especially as it related to processes of meaning making.⁵³ Both cultural traditions of seeing and looking as well as the artifacts those traditions produced take shape in diverse media. People associate the visual objects with expression, pleasure, and emotional response.⁵⁴ This is the moment where visual rhetoric is noteworthy because visual rhetoric helps people to constitute the ways in which they know,

think, and behave.⁵⁵ Visual rhetoric, itself, can be defined as actions that involve various meaningful symbols that influence diverse public.⁵⁶ Visual rhetoric also enables us to discriminate between various forms of purposive images such as the “commercial from the civic, propagandistic from democratic, sentimental from memorable.”⁵⁷ Thus, visual rhetoric is essential to the human meaning making process.

The visual experience facilitated by burlesque and carnivalesque strategies reveals the ways in which marginal groups are positioned in a culture. The experience also encourages the audience to perceive interpretations about a target of criticism that may be similar to the rhetors’ own attitudes. The development of digital technology also enhances the freedom for each individual to share ideas, critiques, interpretations, and expressions. One of the popular digital spheres in which to share diverse perspectives is the blogosphere. Next, I discuss the ways in which the New Atheist movement has deployed its “resistant manifesto” in the contemporary blogosphere.

Resistance as Manifested in the Blogosphere

As a minority movement, the New Atheist movement has effectively employed digital media to spread its message of resistance. The blogosphere is a medium that reaches a worldwide community, is unbounded by time and geography, and provides opportunity to spread and manage issues.⁵⁸ Practically, blog users must affirmatively search the blog, thus many scholars argue that blogs attract homogenous groups of readers or niche audiences who have pre-existing interest in whatever issue the blog addresses.⁵⁹ In his study on the exploration of student resistance, Mark Warren Liew contends that “an informal blogosphere thrives beyond these official uses, characterized by all manner of backstage talk, from casual chatting, joking, and banter to vicious complaints, slander, and rumor.”⁶⁰ Thus, individuals or groups use blogs to

express their opinion towards authoritative objects, such as religious leaders, teachers, governments, legislators, etc. With the freedom of expression in the blogosphere, individuals or groups are able to publicly humiliate, criticize, and mock the authoritative objects.⁶¹ This expression is a part of the resistance towards the hegemonic culture or dominant publics. Resistant activity challenges the dominant institutions, groups, or individuals who serve hegemonic interests and (sometimes) marginalize the interest of the minority.⁶² The resistant approach in online content productions opposes the dominant objects. This approach also functions as a way to express dissent, criticism, and disaffection⁶³ to the “enemy” through computer mediated communication network. Through the blogosphere, atheist communities find ways to connect, express their dissenting opinion, interact with those who have an interest in atheism, and, if necessary, criticize religious groups. Therefore, the blogosphere serves as a rich source of data when assessing visual productions of the atheist movement. Samuel Terrilli and Liney Inga Arnorsdottir contend that the blogosphere is not a “no choice” area, where people have no choice to consume the message. Instead, people need to affirmatively search the blog. For example, a medium such as a public advertisement sometimes “imposes” its message on the audience. However, blogs are located in a virtual arena, where people choose to search it, click it, open it, and eventually read or consume the message. Blogs are not a “pop up” medium, where the message suddenly appears and audiences are “forced” to see it. Having grounded my study in the literature on burlesque and carnivalesque form, visual rhetoric and resistance, and the blogosphere as an emerging technology, I move on to the next section, in which I articulate my critical methodology.

Critical Methodology

Brian L. Ott and Greg Dickinson argue that visual rhetoric is a mode of communication because it consists of meaningful signs and depends on cultural context. They also note that it is an ocular centric rhetorical form, in which looking, seeing, and visualizing are privileged. Ott and Dickinson point out that there are many varieties of visual rhetoric available to be discussed, including paintings, photographs, sculptures, buildings, films, and television programs.⁶⁴ Also, according to Ott and Dickinson, scholars of visual rhetoric historically have examined their subject from one of three perspectives. One group focuses on public affairs to assess the civic role of public images. Another group focuses on theories of everyday life, to explore visual framing of daily life. Another group identifies the logic of visual images.⁶⁵ In this thesis, I address the issue of visual rhetoric by identifying the logic of how the visual imagery may influence the audience. I follow Cara A. Finnegan's lead in treating images as "a potent mode of public address which should be studied in ways that recognize images' political, cultural, historical specificity, as well as their fluidity as circulating objects in public culture."⁶⁶ Following that direction, this thesis will examine the important role of visual rhetoric in the contemporary New Atheist movement. Finnegan presents five approaches for analyzing visual images: production, composition, reproduction, circulation, and reception.⁶⁷ In this study, I will use the composition approach. Finnegan explains, "Composition involves description and interpretation of the visual grammar of images."⁶⁸ Through composition, the critic can understand the cooperation of content and form that construct potential meaning for the audience. In this approach the critic needs to examine color, content, light, and spatial organization.⁶⁹ Images are a representation of values, thoughts, social constructions, etc; thus, by

reading the grammar of an image, a critic may reflect on its potential socio-cultural and political implications.

One way in which images may be assessed as forms of public address is to examine the metaphors invoked explicitly or implicitly in each image.⁷⁰ Scholars have long acknowledged that metaphors construct reality.⁷¹ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explain that since “our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor.”⁷² Similarly, Karrin Vasby Anderson and Kristina Horn Sheeler argue, “Since metaphors are foundational to language, perception, and persuasion, critically assessing their function in a particular body of discourse lends useful insight into how that discourse affects people.”⁷³ Metaphors can produce groupings, arrange processes, and construct both social structures and the opposition to those structures.⁷⁴ In order to identify and assess key metaphors, critics have developed a clustering technique wherein the critic strategically organizes key metaphors and associated terms and concepts.

The five steps to examine texts using metaphors are as follows: first, the critic needs to familiarize herself with the text and the context. Second, the critic must examine the text to determine whether or not conceptual or imagistic patterns emerge. Third, the critic assembles the key concepts into clusters. Cluster analysis allows the critic to begin to understand patterns of metaphors as they emerge in the visual discourse.⁷⁵ Once the clusters of metaphors are identified and compiled, the critic assesses the “latent but visible” rhetorical strategies evidenced within and between the clusters. In order to limit the scope of this study, I will confine my analysis to visual imagery produced in the blogosphere by individuals and groups who identify themselves as atheists. Additionally, I will focus exclusively on images that exhibit characteristics of burlesque and carnivalesque rhetoric. The following additional criteria were used to determine

which specific images would be selected for this study. First, I chose images that can be categorized in the rhetorical strategy of carnivalesque and burlesque to understand the application of these frameworks in the visual production of New Atheist movement. Second, I chose images that were accompanied by verbal discussion, which explained or contextualized their meaning. I look at images that has been reblogged by numerous bloggers or commented by visitors. This allows me to compare my interpretation of the latent metaphors with the rhetor's discussion of the images' explicit meaning. Both theistic and atheistic discourses can trigger strong responses from particular persons or groups. Some images may appear in blogs that would not be published in more mainstream, conventional media. Some images may also appear outside the blog as a public ad, merchandises design, and/or other media that garner public attention outside the blogs. Based on those considerations, I chose images from three blogs: 1) *Atheist's Blog*, 2) *Atheist Comics*, and 3) *The Pantheos- Friendly Atheist Blog*. Tumblr's *Atheist Blog* has been active since July 2010 and approximately 764,771 viewers have visited this blog. The blog consists of images, video, words art, etc. In the blog's archive, the blogger started to post messages in July 2010 and had 153 posts until February 2012.⁷⁶ Another blog resource is the *Atheist Comics*, which also mostly consists of images. It does not have any information about the bloggers, but most of the images get six commentaries on average. With the main statement of "Sometimes you just need to laugh about religion," *Atheist Comic* has interesting posts and images. *Atheist Eve* is housed at the website atheist-community.org and is a humorous blog that caricatures both theism and atheism. The blog was active from October 2004 through August 2012.⁷⁷ The *Atheist Comic* blog was included in the top 30 atheist/agnostic/skeptical blogs according to *The Pantheos*, a prominent website that hosts conversations about faith.⁷⁸ Another popular atheist blog, according to *The Pantheos*, is *Friendly Atheist*.⁷⁹ Although *Atheist Blog* is

not included in *The Pantheos* list, it has many interesting images that employ carnivalesque and burlesque strategies, and its entries have been reblogged by multiple bloggers. Consequently, all of the blogs I've chosen to examine in this study are well-known exemplars of the New Atheist movement. Because the blogosphere offers rhetors a relatively unfettered environment in which to express their opinions visually, it contains the potential for rhetorical innovation. Analysis of key visual images will contribute to the larger understanding of the New Atheist movement.

Preview of Chapters

The thesis is organized into the following chapters: In Chapter One, I introduce the New Atheist movement, review the literature on burlesque and carnivalesque rhetoric, and outline my critical methodology. In Chapter Two, I assess the ways in which select visual images produced by the New Atheist movement exhibit burlesque rhetorical characteristics. Chapter Three examines the New Atheist movement imagery from the perspective of carnivalesque. In each of those chapters, I consider the ways in which burlesque and carnivalesque discourse functions as a rhetoric of resistance that facilitates the construction of alternate identities. In Chapter Four, I conclude my study by reflecting on the ways in which the visual productions of the New Atheist movement display alternative points of view, make implicit and explicit claims, and facilitate the development of new identities.

NOTES

¹ Douglas Hartmann, Xuefang Zhang, William Wischstadt, "One (Multicultural) Nation Under God? Changing Uses and Meaning of the Term 'Judeo Christian' in the America Media," *Journal of Media and Religion* 4(2005): 207-234.

² Hartmann, Zhang, and Wischstadt, *One (Multicultural) Nation Under God*.

³ Barry Alexander Kosmin and Ariela Keysar with Ryan Cragun and Juhem Navarro-Rivera, "A Report Base on the American Religious Identification Survey," (Hartfort, Connecticut: Trinity College, 2008).

⁴ Penny Edgel, Joseph Gerteis, and Douglas Hartmann, "Atheists as 'Other': Moral Boundaries and Cultural membership in America," *American Sociological Review* 71 (2006): 674-687.

⁵ Alice Gribbin, "Preview: The Four Horsemen of New Atheism reunited," *New Statesman*, December 22, 2011, <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2011/12/richard-dawkins-issue-hitchens> (accessed October 30, 2013).

⁶ Stephanie Simon, "Atheist Reach Out-Just Don't Call it Proselytizing," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 18, 2008, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122696699813835335.html> (accessed October 30, 2011).

⁷ Simon, *Atheist Reach Out-Just Don't Call it Proselytizing*.

⁸ Richard Cimino, *The Secular Revolution* (Berkeley: University California Press, 2003).

⁹ Mario Diani. "The Concept of Social Movement." *Sociological Review*, 40, 1 (1992):13.

¹⁰ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Collective Action, Social Movements and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹¹ However, Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith argued that organization, which concerns on secularism, has had less impact in American Society compare to the religious-based organization, because of the instability of organization and marginalization. The pressure from the religious-based organization is even stronger when it comes to political decision especially in religious based states. See Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith. "Secular Humanism and Atheism Beyond Progressive Secularism," *Sociology of Religion* (2007): 407-424.

¹² Richard Dawkins, "Science and The New Atheist," *Put into Inquiry*, December 17, 2007, http://www.pointofinquiry.oeg/richard_dawkins_science_and_the_new_atheism (accessed October 24, 2011).

¹³ Dawkins, *Science and The New Atheist*.

¹⁴ Tom Flynn, "Tour de force," *Free Inquiry* (April/May, 2007): 57-58.

¹⁵ Gribbin, *Four Horsemen of New Atheism Reunited*.

¹⁶ Similar ideas upon the controversies of New Atheism and problems of oversimplifications and generalization can be found in the discussion of Investigating Atheism, a website from Cambridge University, Psychology and Religion Research Group that discussed the problems around the issue of Atheism. Investigating Atheism, *Cambridge University*, <http://www.investigatingatheism.info/history.html> (Accessed June 24, 2013)

¹⁷ Sharkey, *American Evangelicals in Egypt*.

¹⁸ David Richardson, "Uses and Gratifications of Agnostic Refuge: Case Study of a Skeptical Online Congregation," *Journal of Media and Religion* 2, 4 (2003): 237-250.

¹⁹ Amanda Lenhart and Fox Sussanah, "Bloggers: A Portrait of the Internet's New Storytellers." *Pew Internet and American Life Project* (2006) <http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs> (accessed February 25, 2012).

²⁰ Various research in Atheism examining the textual and written words in the growing New Atheist movement. See Richardson, *Uses and Gratifications of Agnostic Refuge*. David Richardson examined the Internet discussion group (IDG) through the conversational documents in the agnostic groups. See also Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, *Secular Humanism and Atheism Beyond Progressive Secularism*. Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith examined the textual analysis and medium theory in understanding the relationship of atheist and theist group.

²¹ Lester C. Olson, Cara A. Finnegan, and Diana S. Hope, *Visual Rhetoric: A Reader in Communication and American Culture*, (California: Sage Publication, Inc. 2008).

²² Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, Third Edition with A New Afterword (Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, Ltd, 1984).

²³ Burke, *Attitude Toward History*, 20

²⁴ Burke, *Attitude Toward History*, 23

²⁵ Burke, *Attitude Toward History*, 25

²⁶ Edward C Appel, "Rush to Judgement: Burlesque, Tragedy, and Hierarchal Alchemy in the Rhetoric of America's Foremost Political Talkshow Host," *Southern Communication Journal* 68, 3 (2003): 217-230.

²⁷ Burke, *Attitude Toward History*, 30

²⁸ Appel, *Rush to Judgement*, 220.

²⁹ Appel, *Rush to Judgement*.

³⁰ Appel, *Rush to Judgement*..

³¹ Appel, *Rush to Judgement*, 217-230.

³² Paul Pablo' Martin and Valerie Renegar, "The Man for His Time: The Big Lebowski as Carnavalesque Social Critique," *Communication Studies* 58, 3 (2007): 299–313.

³³ Stephen Gencarella Olbrys, "Disciplining the Carnavalesque: Chris Farley's Exotic Dance," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 3, 3 (2006): 240.

³⁴ Sobhi Al Zobaidi, "Hashish and the 'Carnavalesque' in Egyptian Cinema," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 3 (2010): 375–392.

³⁵ Michael Gardiner. *Critiques of Everyday Life* (London : Routledge, 2000).

³⁶ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, "From carnival to transgression," in K. Gelder & S. Thornton (Eds.), *The subcultures reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 293–301. Reprinted from *The politics and poetics of transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986). See also Paul Pablo Martin and Valerie Renegar, *The Man for His Time: The Big Lebowski as Carnavalesque Social Critique*.

³⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*, Translation from C. Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, Original work published 1963).

³⁸ Michael Gardiner. *Critiques of Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2000).

³⁹ Thomas Hale, *On Being a Missionary* (California: William Carey Library Pub, 2003). See also Paul Pablo Martin and Valerie Renegar, *The Man for His Time: The Big Lebowski as Carnavalesque Social Critique*

⁴⁰ Hale, *On Being a Missionary*, see also Martin and Renegar, *The Man for His Time: The Big Lebowski as Carnavalesque Social Critique*.

⁴¹ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*.

⁴² Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*.

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- ⁴³ Craig Calhoun, *Habermas and The Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).
- ⁴⁴ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text* 25, 26 (1990): 56-80.
- ⁴⁵ Robert Asen, "Seeking the "Counter" in Counterpublics," *Communication Theory* 10 (2000): 430
- ⁴⁶ Asen, *Seeking the "Counter" in Counterpublics*, 144
- ⁴⁷ Asen, *Seeking the "Counter" in Counterpublics*, 113
- ⁴⁸ Robert Entman, "Cascading Activation," *Political Communication* 20 (2003): 415-440.
- ⁴⁹ Entman, *Cascading Activation*, 417
- ⁵⁰ Brian L. Ott, Greg Dickinson, and Erick Aoki, "Spaces of Remembering and Forgetting." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 3 (2006): 27-47.
- ⁵¹ Ott, Dickinson, and Aoki, *Spaces of Remembering and Forgetting*.
- ⁵² Lester L. Olson, Cara A. Finnegan, Diane S. Hope, *Visual Rhetoric: A Reader in Communication and American Culture* (California: Sage Publication, Inc, 2008)
- ⁵³ Brian Ott, and Greg. Dickinson, "Visual Rhetoric and/as Critical Pedagogy." *The SAGE Handbook of Rhetorical Studies*. Eds. Andrea Lunsford, Kirt H. Wilson, and Rosa Eberly (California: Thousand Oaks, 2008): 391-405.
- ⁵⁴ Olson, Finnegan, Hope, *Visual Rhetoric: A Reader in Communication and American Culture*.
- ⁵⁵ Olson, Finnegan, Hope, *Visual Rhetoric: A Reader in Communication and American Culture*.
- ⁵⁶ Olson, Finnegan, Hope, *Visual Rhetoric: A Reader in Communication and American Culture*.

⁵⁷ Olson, Finnegan, Hope, *Visual Rhetoric: A Reader in Communication, and American Culture*, 2

⁵⁸ Lance Porter, Kaye D Sweetser Trammell, Deborah Chung, and Eunseong Kim, E. "Blog Power: Examining the Effects of Practitioner Blog Use on Power in Public Relations," *Public Relations Review* 33 (2007): 92-95.

⁵⁹ Samuel Terrilli and Liney Inga Arnorsdottir. "The CEO as Celebrity Blogger: Is there a Ghost or a Ghostwriter in the Machine?" *Public Relations Journal*, 2, 4, (2008).

⁶⁰ Mark Warren Liew. "Digital Hidden Transcripts: Exploring Student Resistance in Blog." *Computer and Composition* (Elsevier) 27 (2010): 304-314.

⁶¹ Liew, *Digital Hidden Transcripts*.

⁶² Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by Myra B, (New York: Continuum, 2005).

⁶³ Liew, *Digital Hidden Transcripts*.

⁶⁴ Ott and Dickinson, *Visual Rhetoric and/as Critical Pedagogy*, 392

⁶⁵ Ott and Dickinson, *Visual Rhetoric and/as Critical Pedagogy*, 392

⁶⁶ Cara A Finegan, *Studying Visual Modes of Public Address: Lewis Hine's Progressive Era Child Labor Rhetoric*, 252

⁶⁷ Finegan, *Studying Visual Modes of Public Address*. In this paper, Finnegan presented five approaches to understand visual imagery in Public Address especially when critics want to conduct visual investigation. First, production is a process to understand the nature of the images, especially the original of the image such as where the image comes from and where to find the image. This approach focuses on the genre of the image such as documentary, advertising, religious iconography, etc. Second approach is compositional approach. In this

approach the critics are expected to engage in the description and interpretation of the visual imagery by analyzing the content, color, light, and spatial organization. Third of all, the critics try to look at the reproduction of the images through understanding a specific image in a specific context. This approach is based on the assumption that the image can be actively engaged and discovered by the audience, not just wait there passively. There are images that have powerful rhetorical message. Fourth is circulation. This approach helps the critics to discover the fluidity of the images through passive transmission of ideas, information, or images. Fifth is reception, where the critics try to assess the audience response to a work, through empirical research or evaluating the text.

⁶⁸ Fineggan, *Studying Visual Modes of Public Address*, 253.

⁶⁹ Fineggan, *Studying Visual Modes of Public Address*, 253.

⁷⁰ Burke, *Attitude Toward History*.

⁷¹ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, “*Metaphors we live by*,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

⁷² Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*, 3

⁷³ Karrin Vasby Anderson and Kristina Horn Sheeler, *Governing Codes: Gender, Metaphor, and Political Identity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005).

⁷⁴ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*, 3

⁷⁵ Ivie, *Metaphor and the Rhetorical Invention of Cold War ‘Idealist*, 167, see also George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, “Conceptual Metaphor in Everyday Language,” in *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor*, ed. Mark Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981): 289-292

⁷⁶ The first blog's address that I will examine is as follows:

<http://atheistsblog.tumblr.com/>

⁷⁷ According to the Atheist Eve blog, the one who make the caricature of Atheist Eve is Tracie Harris. She is a graphic designer in Austin, TX. She received her BA in Liberal Studies from the University of Central Florida. Look at the Atheist Community of Austin, "About the Author," *Atheist Eve*, <http://www.atheist-community.org/atheisteve/> (Accessed September 12, 2012)

⁷⁸ Daniel Florien, "The Top 30 Atheist/Agnostic/Skeptic Blogs," *The Pantheos Unreasonable Faith* (February 5, 2009), <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/unreasonablefaith/2009/02/the-top-30-atheistagnostic-blogs/> (Accessed September 15, 2012). In the list the Atheist Comic named as Religion Comics with blog address as follows: <http://godisimaginary.com/comics/>

⁷⁹ Florien, *The Top 30 Atheist/Agnostic/Skeptic Blogs*.

CHAPTER TWO: BURLESQUE IN NEW ATHEISM

Faith means not wanting to know what is true. — Friedrich Nietzsche⁸⁰

The fact that a believer is happier than a skeptic is no more to the point than the fact that a drunken man is happier than a sober one. — George Bernard Shaw⁸¹

The atheist communities find ways to connect, to express dissenting opinions, to interact with those who are interested in atheism, and to criticize religious groups through various forms of communication, mass media, and rhetorical works of art. Some are entertaining, some offensive, and some have targets for criticism. The two quotations above represent examples of two forms of resistance and criticism of atheist groups or individuals towards the dominant religious perspective in the United States culture. The statements above are not only atheists' opinions, but they are examples of logical premises of atheism in understanding the construction of religious values in the dominant public sphere.

In this chapter, I examine key examples of the atheist blogosphere's visual rhetoric that employs burlesque rhetorical strategy, arguing that this strategy functions as rhetoric of resistance, dividing the atheist audience from members of the dominant culture. Only through understanding the object of atheists' criticism can we see how atheists resist groups in society who have different points of view. It will also highlight the perspectives of atheists who choose frames of rejection as opposed to frames of acceptance.

In this chapter, I first look at the target of atheists through identification of population context and the application theory of burlesque. Second, I examine the symbols and logical statements that exist in the explicit and implicit meaning of the images that I clustered and selected. This section focuses on understanding the object of burlesque, the attitude, and the values that are criticized by the atheist as the rhetor. Finally, I assess the pattern of context to

understand the key concepts that emerge in the atheists' visual discourse. In this section, I demonstrate in which area of discourse the atheists perform a frame of rejection towards believers. In particular, this discourse critiques the power relationships created by religious faith and questions the relevance of religion in contemporary society.

The Burlesque Target

Christian believers dominate religiously affiliated groups in the US even though various surveys also indicate a growth in unaffiliated populations such as atheists and agnostics. According to the research by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Christian believers represent 78.4% of the population.⁸² As the majority, Christianity is segregated into various sects and groups. The biggest one is Protestantism (51.3% of the total US population), Catholicism (23.9%), and less than 2 % Mormonism, Jehovah's Witness, and Orthodox.⁸³ Meanwhile, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and other faiths combined are only 4.7% of the total population. The rest of the US population remains unaffiliated (16.1%), identifying as atheist (1.6%), agnostic (2.4%), or nothing in particular (12.1%). Similarly, the United States Census bureau reports that more than 173 million people identify with a Christian denomination.⁸⁴ However, since 1990, 2001, and 2008, the percentage of adult Americans who consider themselves religiously non-affiliated is increasing. There were more than 14 million people in this group in 1990, more than 29 million in 2001, and more than 34 million in 2008.⁸⁵ Despite this growth, atheism is obviously still the minority and Christianity is the majority. Consequently, if atheists want to resist the dominant group, Christian believers will be the first targets. Additionally, since atheism rejects the overall concept of deities, believers in Krishna, Buddha, Shiva, and other gods may also become targets of criticism.

As noted in chapter one, Kenneth Burke contends that the burlesque form is an external appeal that strategically puts down its victim.⁸⁶ The target of burlesque humor can be the rhetor's subject as well as the sites in which the subject demonstrates its power. Successful burlesque humor positions the rhetor as a smarter, more logical protagonist and can lead to the justification of action, such as when the audience agrees with the condemnation of the targets. Unsuccessful burlesque humor can backfire, however, leading the audience to think that the rhetor is sarcastic or mean. Burke argues, "Here the attack really is external—and for that reason, though we enjoy burlesque as an occasional dish, no critic has ever been inclined to select it as the *piece de resistance* for a steady diet."⁸⁷ Burke contends that burlesque will change every possibility into a certainty and the goal is to make the rhetor superior to the target. Burke states, "We must not be merely equal to it, we must be enough greater than it to be able to 'discount' it."⁸⁸ When atheists deploy burlesque rhetoric, then, they put down believers' attitudes as ridiculous and irrelevant to the contemporary context.

In addition to ridiculing its target, burlesque rhetoric can enable resistance. Resistant activity is an effort to challenge the dominant institutions, groups, or individuals who serve hegemonic interests and marginalize the interests of minority groups.⁸⁹ This form of critique also allows the rhetor to express dissent, offer criticism, express disaffection, and suggest an alternative point of view.⁹⁰

In the next section of this chapter, I assess the burlesque appeals in selected examples of the visual rhetoric that populate the atheist blogosphere. I argue that burlesque involves arguments about the irrelevance of religious teaching and problematizes the power or authority of religion in society. Firstly, New Atheism ridicules the target by arguing that religion is no longer the answer for the current context because religion is outmoded. Secondly, the atheists

criticize the power and the authority of religion to impose a purportedly irrational decision on their believers. New Atheism presents this message not through serious arguments but through laughter. Using this strategy, the visual rhetoric of New Atheism is designed to entertain the audience and at the same time create meaningful public discourse.

Irrationality and Irrelevancy as Burlesque Rhetorical Strategy

The burlesque imagery of the atheist blogosphere targets religious people both explicitly and implicitly. To deride an object, the rhetor needs to display the target's ludicrousness and the futility of his/her belief system. The New Atheism imagery scorns religious people by asserting religion's irrelevancy within contemporary context. In the past, religions often formed the bases for social judgment. Contemporary societies still may draw on religion as one foundation for judgment; however, other standards such as scientific rationality also inform social judgment. The changing standards of judgment allow the atheist rhetors to create a comparison between old-style and more contemporary standards. The conceptual design of their burlesque rhetoric attempts to portray religious judgment as anachronistic. I selected two representative images that demonstrate this particular burlesque appeal. The first image is designed to demonstrate the irrelevance of religion's historical moral standard to the contemporary context. Additionally, and sadly, the image emphasizes the ways in which religion historically has persecuted and victimized those it deems to be "sinners." Because this serious message is delivered through the rhetorical strategy of burlesque, the image entertains even as it ridicules the believers throughout history who are the burlesque targets. The second image also contrasts the past with the present in an image related to technological dependence. Both images demonstrate the strategy of burlesque insofar as they argue, implicitly and explicitly, that religion is outmoded.



(Figure 1-“Man and Religion: A Synopsis,” *Atheist Blog Tumblr*)⁹¹

A caricature entitled “Man and Religion Synopsis” was posted on October 17, 2011.

There were 122 bloggers who responded, re-blogged, and commented on the cartoon. The image also appeared in the popular “Friendly Atheist” blog,⁹² and it was re-blogged by 154 bloggers.⁹³ Other online newspapers, blogs, and websites also have displayed this image.⁹⁴

The cartoon first explains the introduction of Christianity to a man. In the first frame the Christian’s leader promotes Christianity to a bald man by saying, “Christianity is a religion of peace.” The second frame shows the image of the bald man running away from a Christian soldier with a long sword, an armored uniform, and a cross symbol on the shield. Using the word “Infidel,” this picture recalls the Crusades—a historical period during which the term “infidel” referred to those outside of the Christian faith.⁹⁵ Pope Innocent IV asserted, “If the infidels do not obey, they ought to be compelled by the secular arm and war may be declared upon them by

the pope, and nobody else.”⁹⁶ The rhetorical strategy of this image is to associate Christianity with its documented history of religious war.

The third frame shows the bald man being tortured by a religious leader. The religious leader says, “Heretics” to the bald man when he was about to burn him. The word “heretic” invokes the Roman Catholic Church’s history of prosecuting scientists who disagreed with church theology. The term typically connotes antagonism towards religious codes, morality, connections to Satan, and/or religious damnation.⁹⁷ Historically, crimes of heresy have been punishable by death—sometimes caused by being burned at the stake or thrown off a cliff. For example, Giordano Bruno was burned by the *ecclesial* order because of his belief about the universe as a constellation of numerous planets, suns, and stars.⁹⁸ The third frame recalls the “dark” history of Christianity, not by arguments but by caricaturing the Christians’ attitude. This rhetorical strategy illustrates the enemy’s cruel attitude but in a funny way, to question the “moral value” which is always emphasized by the enemy, and at the same time, the history proved that the attitudes of the enemy were against their own moral value.

The fourth frame shows the bald man tied with a rope, sitting on a net suspended from a long stick. At the end of the stick, a man dressed as a pilgrim holds the stick above a pond. It appears as though the pilgrim was drowning the bald man. While the bald man was blowing out his cheek, it seems as though he was holding his breath under the water. The pilgrim says, “Witch” to the bald man. This frame recalls the “witch hunting” that occurred during the 14th to 18th centuries in Africa, Europe, and colonial America.⁹⁹ Thousands of people were jailed, subjected to harsh penalties, and executed after being tried as witches.¹⁰⁰

The next frame illustrates the bald man with shorts and a t-shirt, reading a sign in front of a church that says, “Happy Church, Sunday Sermon, Have a nice day.” The message

acknowledges that modern Christianity is not as violent as it had been during the historical periods referred to in the earlier frames of the cartoon. The last frame, however, shows a Muslim cleric repeating the same slogan attributed to Christians in the earlier frames, “Islam is a religion of peace.” The bald man looks frightened. The implicit meaning is that all religions betray their own theology and resort to violence when dealing with people who oppose their points of view.

The burlesque rhetorical strategy in this comic ridicules Christian believers and the dark side of the history of Christianity. Islam also becomes the target of this burlesque, but Islam comes across as a contemporary threat whose dangerous future is a story “to be continued.” The external message is clear because the rhetor portrays the target from an outsider’s perspective, simplifying the history of Christianity and associating it solely with its darkest episodes. The comic also ridicules the contrast between the promise of Christian religious leaders through the words “religion of peace” and the accusatory words: “infidel,” “heretics,” and “witch.” Despite the comedic tone, the cartoon demonstrates the “dark side” of Christianity’s history and alleges similarities between that and contemporary Islamic teaching.

The burlesque image tries to challenge the audience to connect the moral value of religious people’s attitude with contemporary judgment. The audience in this era has different judgment than the people in the past. Those who historically were labeled heretics, witches, and infidels according to Christian standards, would likely not be punished today. Although some modern Christian denominations might condemn actions like heresy and witchcraft, contemporary punishment within the church is not as severe as punishments have been historically.¹⁰¹ The image also provides the information about this change by acknowledgment in the fifth frame that Christians have finally “calmed down.”

The standard of judgment about who deserves the death penalty has changed as well. The power of religious authority to control the punishment for men or women is very limited when compared to the pre-Renaissance era. Therefore, the cartoon suggests that the death penalty is no longer an acceptable punishment for religious heresy. This understanding provides a conclusion about the “unfairness” of Christian belief to those who become the “victims” of execution. It also illustrates a cruel image of Christians and questions the moral judgment of religious believers. The question for contemporary audience members is whether decisions of punishment should be based on religious points of view. When religion was in power, was it really leading humans to positive moral values and upholding human rights?

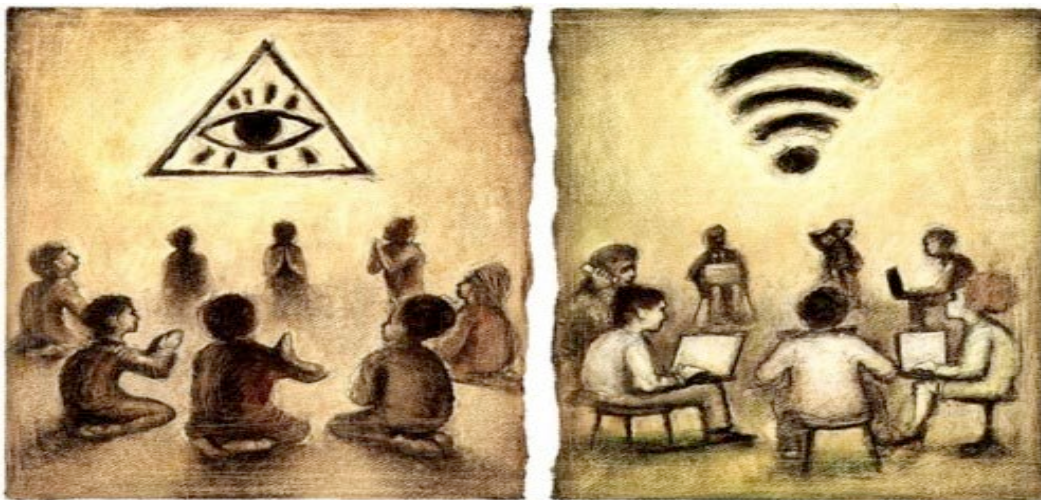
The image also challenges the assertion made by some religious believers that atheists, as a group, are immoral due to their lack of religious belief. By characterizing Christian history as one dominated by immoral actions, unfair judgments, and cruelty to non-believers, the image asserts that religion does not necessarily bring peace to human life. Instead, it can create war, produce injustice, and inflict cruelty on others, especially when religion controls social standards.

The burlesque image also plays with laughter, emotions, and irony. For example, the strategy of using the bald man with different expressions in each frame provides an interesting illustration, even though the message is about the death penalty as the ultimate punishment for humans in many countries. The rhetor avoids blood or the death narrative of the bald man. The avoidance of showing what happened next with the bald man after he was chased, burned, and drowned undergirds the humor of the image. The image emphasizes what the punishments were and who should be punished by the Christians instead of detailing the literal violence of each punishment. The bald man represents people who were introduced to religion and became the

victims of that religion. His expressions also frame the message as comedic and entertaining because they, themselves, are humorously exaggerated. At the same time his expressions gradually shift from happiness to fear, from fear to panic, from panic to relief and then back to panic with the onset of Islamic extremism. Insofar as the audience identifies with the bald man, they also note the gradual changes in the man's expression. Thus, the image efficiently encourages the audience to empathize with his changing emotions even as they laugh at the absurdities of religion. Finally, the comic employs irony, emphasizing the irony between Christianity's promise of peace and its history of injustice.

The concluding frame suggests that modern progress is not enough to inoculate the populace against the potential evils of organized religion, conflating contemporary Islamism with the darkest elements of Christianity's past. The sentence of "Islam is a religion of peace," also a burlesque approach to point out the statement of many Islamic leaders or politicians after 9/11 or London Bombings 7/7 to present Islam as a peaceful religion.¹⁰² The statement in the cartoon creates an irony of racial politics in USA especially after the attack of 9/11 that involved Muslim radical groups and creates fear or Islamophobia. The wittiness in the cartoon illustrates a contrast feeling between the word "peace" and the bald man fear expression. Sam Harris, as one of the leading atheist movement, can nearly describe the contrast strategy to show the sarcasm of peaceful religion promotion of Islam. Harris says, "There is an uncanny irony here that many have noticed. The position of the Muslim community in the face of all provocations seems to be: Islam is a religion of peace, and if you say that it isn't, we will kill you."¹⁰³ This irony and contrasting strategy came up as the concluding frame that also shows the ongoing issue of problematic religion, which mostly highlights Islam.

Despite its ironic portrayal of violence and injustice, this burlesque image is designed to attract an audience. In the cluttered blogosphere, messages must compel viewers' attention. By using caricature, the rhetor hopes that the audience will notice the message, that it will grab their attention, trigger their memory, and engage their emotions. Burlesque messages not only entertain, but they trigger identification among viewers who share similar interpretations of Christianity's history. Burlesque also can ridicule the relevance of religion by related it to a more contemporary phenomenon. The image of "Wi-Fi: Omnipresent, all knowing ;)" best describes this maneuver.



(Figure 2-“Wi-Fi: omnipresent, all knowing☺,” *Atheist Blog Tumblr*)¹⁰⁴

This image was posted on November 5th, 2011 and there were 102 bloggers who responded and re-blogged on the image.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, the argument made visually in this image has been repeated in the verbal discourse of “other articles, websites, and blogs, which equate the omniscience of the Internet with the omniscience of God.”¹⁰⁶ Even though these websites and blogs do not have the same image, their analysis echoes the argument presented in the preceding image.

The image uses two frames with a sketch style and the dominant color of crème. The first frame shows eight people kneeling in a circle with their hands clasped as if they are praying; each individual's head is tilted to look up to a triangle floating above them. The triangle has an eye filling the center of the triangle. The second frame shows seven people sitting in a circle, with their heads down and their eyes looking at their laptops or phones. In the middle of the circle the symbol of a Wi-Fi connection appears. The image's caption explains its meaning: "Wi-Fi: Omnipresent, all knowing ;)"

The burlesque in this image ridicules the Christian "trinity" and the concept of God as an omnipresent and omniscient figure who exists ubiquitously and knows everything.¹⁰⁷ The triangle with the eye in the middle is similar to the symbol of eye of providence or the all-seeing eye of God, which also appears as Great Seal of the United States on the one dollar bill.¹⁰⁸ A Christian version of the Eye of Providence emphasizes the concept of Trinity. The Wi-Fi symbol is placed in the second frame but in a line with the symbol of the triangle, with four full black lines to symbolize the "full power" of the Wi-Fi. The power of Wi-Fi, which connects to the Internet, enables humans to do many things and to know many things. This image equates the Christian view of God's presence with the contemporary omnipresence of the Internet, reducing God's supposed omniscience to the knowledge readily available through a Google search. Since the notion of "bowing" to the Internet is ridiculous, the cartoon implies that submission to a deity is similarly ridiculous. The image not only ridicules the target, but also promotes the idea that knowledge and science provide answers to human problems. Since digital technology can be used as a tool to find the answers that humans are looking for, praying to "God" is obsolete.

The burlesque image ignores the motivations that may influence the target's attitude or behaviors. Christians, for example, may pray not only for guidance but also to fulfill their

spiritual needs. The rhetors, conversely, emphasize the external behavior of the target and compare to the idea of praying for an “answer” to browsing for an answer. The burlesque image creates a logical conclusion by changing the ambiguous intention of the people who pray for various reasons to a definite proposition that people pray to get something.¹⁰⁹ The burlesque tries to change the old-fashioned thesis, which is “pray to get what you want and to find the answer to your problem,” and transforms it to a partially contemporary antithesis, which is “search the Internet to get what you want and find the answer to your problem.”¹¹⁰

The burlesque message in this cartoon also addresses humans’ supposed dependency on God and/or technology. The image shows the contrast in the position of the people. The people praying in the left image are looking up at the symbol, thereby illustrating the notion of dependency on the trinity and the hierarchical position between “God” and humanity. The upward gaze shows a vertical relationship between the trinity symbol and the people. Meanwhile, the second frame shows the head either looking down or positioned neutrally. This frame symbolizes human independence. Humans utilize technology without being subjugated to it. It shows that humans become the “master” of the technology and do not need to depend on something above called “God.” Ironically, the image could also be interpreted as portraying humans’ “unconscious” dependency on technology. The Wi-Fi is placed in an “unequal” or vertical position to the people in the second frame. It could suggest that humans can master the technology but without the Wi-Fi connection the technology will not work. Not only have humans mastered the technology but also they have come to depend on technology. Therefore, if the first frame shows humans’ dependence on God, the second frame shows the interdependence of humans and technology.

The caricature has two possible criticisms in its rhetorical message. Firstly, because the burlesque approach does not seek to preserve an intimate or respectful relationship between the rhetors and their target, it can lead to mutual disrespect.¹¹¹ The victims can be defined as Christian people because of the similarities of praying (kneeling down position) and the trinity symbol. The linear line between the trinity symbol and Wi-Fi symbol might offend the Christians. The trinity is seen as a holy deity. However, when this symbol is placed equal with the Wi-Fi, it indicates the rejection of Christians' symbol of authority. Second, the caption, "Wi-Fi: Omnipresent, all knowing ;)," reinforces the ridicule. The word omnipresent means the ubiquitous presence of something or someone. So, the Christian belief that God is everywhere is likened to the mundane omnipresence of Wi-Fi. However, the message of Wi-Fi as omnipresent is partial because Wi-Fi is only present where the machines are set up. Thus, Wi-Fi is only present when the "owner" of the Wi-Fi sets it up, and its strength depends on the coverage area. The word "omnipresent" for the Wi-Fi can also be interpreted as the Internet, which can be connected everywhere as long as it is in the coverage area. However, the circular shapes of the people who want to use computer and connect the Wi-Fi in the image actually illustrate and strengthen the limited power of Wi-Fi only in particular circular area.

The image is successfully showing the peripheral comparison of getting an answer through praying and searching the Internet with Wi-Fi. The image also shows the contrast between modern technological development and "old-fashioned" prayer. One shortcoming of the imagistic argument is the suggestion that people of faith pray only to get the answers. It disregards the possibility that believers pray to commune with God or to cultivate thankfulness. By mischaracterizing the purposes of prayer, the burlesque critique becomes less insightful.

Nevertheless, the comments associated with this visual confirm that the burlesque critique resonated with its intended audience.

The composition of New Atheism's visual productions produces patterns in a conceptual system that are designed to reject religion. The pattern in both burlesque images invokes historical and contemporary religious narratives, suggests that religion produces unreliable moral standards, reminds the viewer of the cruel consequences of religious judgment, and emphasizes the insignificance of religion in the contemporary context. The conceptual system in both images emerges through the visual discourse in implicit and explicit symbols. The visual discourse develops a "latent but visible" rhetorical strategy through ridiculing religion.

Some verbal discussions are found as responses to the images as an indication of similar "latent but visible" interpretations. For example, the "Man and Religion: A Synopsis" has been followed by verbal commentaries of the audience that confirm my analysis. On the Pantheos website there are seven commentaries that appear to respond to the caricature. These three commentaries represent the interpretation of the image.

All Religions & all Gods are the creations of Evil Men to control other men & women-Hitslappers¹¹²

I wouldn't go that far. Many gods are developed to explain things which humans cannot understand or control, but like to think they can, and some religions are born out of mutual respect and belief among a communal group that x is the way to do things. Evil comes in when these things are used willfully for the interests of the controlling elite, which happens just as readily in non-religious endeavours. See Capitalism. – John M White.¹¹³

Comments such as these suggest that the narrative of man and religion is related closely to the ability of religion to control human life and construct social judgment. Although the Wi-Fi omnipresent image did not have a comment string associated with it, the comparison of God to Google is a well-established concept in the New Atheism community. Examination of that

discourse helps to confirm my reading of the cartoon. and also it confirms my analysis of the images. For example, one comment in the main page of a website called the churchofgoogle.org, which has 16,539 active members stated,

Google is everywhere at once (Omnipresent). Google is virtually everywhere on earth at the same time. Billions of indexed WebPages hosted from every corner of the earth. With the proliferation of Wi-Fi networks, one will eventually be able to access Google from anywhere on earth, truly making Her an omnipresent entity.-The Church of Google¹¹⁴

Another statement that appeared in the *New York Times* equates wireless technology with God. For example,

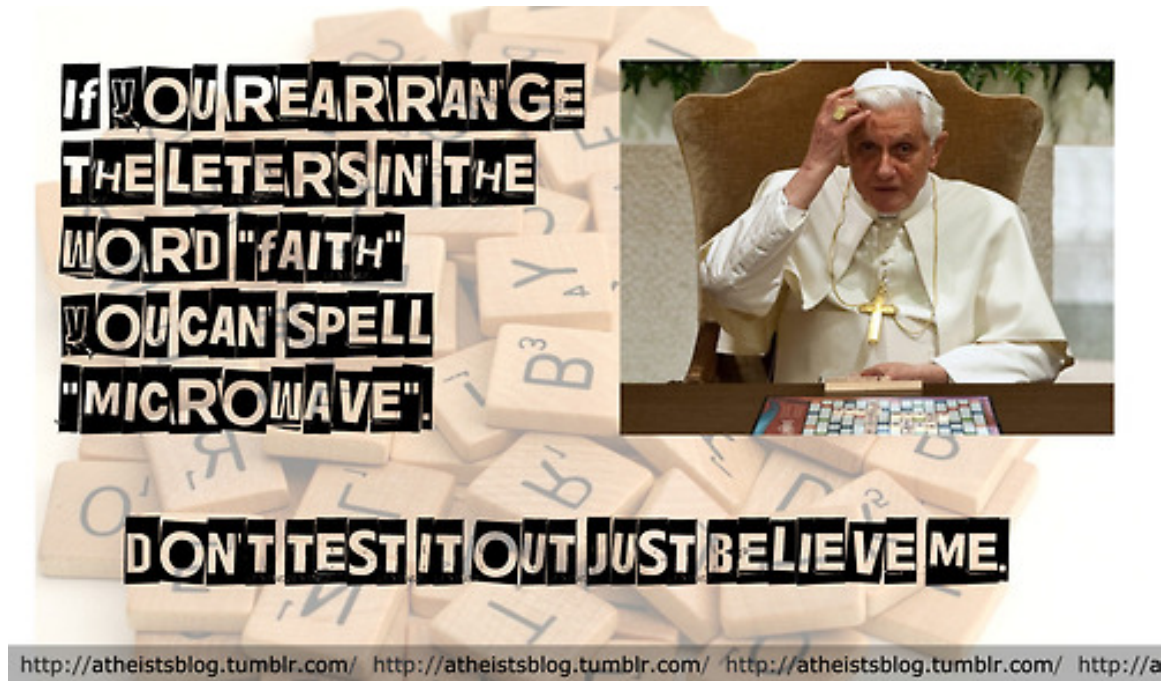
If I can operate Google, I can find anything. And with wireless, it means I will be able to find anything, anywhere, anytime. Which is why I say that Google, combined with Wi-Fi, is a little bit like God. God is wireless, God is everywhere and God sees and knows everything. Throughout history, people connected to God without wires. Now, for many questions in the world, you ask Google, and increasingly, you can do it without wires, too – Alan Cohen¹¹⁵

The “Wi-Fi, omnipresent, all knowing” image picks up on the widely-circulated metaphor that associates God with wireless technology. This burlesque imagery minimizes and ridicules God’s power by equating it with mundane, everyday technology. It also implies that modern technology can meet the needs of contemporary humanity, negating the imperative to rely on God/gods.

Rejection of Authority as a Burlesque Strategy

Whereas the images examined in the previous section employ burlesque to ridicule believers and their actions, in this section I examine an image that uses the burlesque form to ridicule a religious authority figure. I argue that the burlesque strategy involves a rejection of the target’s authority through tactics of humiliation. The next image demonstrates the example of humiliation of a religious figure by exaggerating his stupidity. At the same time, the rhetor designed the message to be entertaining and smart. It involves implicit symbols to show the

inequality of intellectuality between the rhetor and the target. The cleverness of the burlesque strategy in the image is also designed to empower the audience to explore the meaning of the symbols.



(Figure 3-“If You Rearrange the Word Faith, You Can Spell Microwave,” *Atheist Blog Tumblr*)¹¹⁶

This image appeared in the *Atheist Blog* on October 11, 2012.¹¹⁷ There were 35 people who re-blogged this image. The most interesting point about this image is the words “If you rearrange the letters in the word ‘faith,’ you can spell ‘microwave.’” These words also appeared in around 264 atheist websites and blogs, with different illustrations and videos, such as when it appeared in the *Think Atheist* website,¹¹⁸ where 17,090 people connected as the members. However the rearranging of words comprised of letters that look like *Scrabble* tiles also creates an interesting and a strategic burlesque appeal. Contextually, the image appeared on October 11, the same day that Pope Benedict XVI announced the “Year of Faith.” This celebration of faith started on the October 11, 2012 and will conclude on November 24, 2013.¹¹⁹ He announced it as

a celebration of the 50th anniversary of Vatican II in the Apostolic Speech and letter to all Catholic churches in the world.

First, the background of the image is comprised of tiles from the board game *Scrabble*. The tiles seem to be piled randomly, but a closer examination of the background reveals the tiles “b” and “y” arranged together, implicitly suggesting that the ludicrous quotation could be attributed to Pope Benedict XVI. The statement “If you rearrange the letters in the word ‘faith,’ you can spell ‘microwave’ BY Benedict XVI” is highly strategic. It frames Pope Benedict XVI, the prime authority in the Catholic religion, as someone who fails to grasp something that can be easily disproven by a mundane game analogy.

Secondly, the picture of Pope Benedict XVI sitting on the fancy chair with his typical pope attire behind a table also has a salient symbolic meaning. On top of the table there is a *Scrabble* game. The pope wears a white zucchetto made of silk and the complete attire of *Papal regalia*—the official attire for the head of Roman Catholic Church and the Vatican City State.¹²⁰ With his right hand touching his forehead, the picture shows his golden Ring of Fisherman or *Annulus Piscatoris*, which is the symbol of the Pope as the fisherman of humanity.¹²¹ It is engraved with the picture of St. Peter fishing on a boat and the Pope’s name. According to papal tradition, people kneel down in front of the pope and kiss the ring. Pope Benedict XVI also wears a giant golden cross necklace as a symbol of Christ. The Pope’s eyebrow is wrinkled. While the image shows a clear symbol of the Pope’s authority, at the same time, it suggests that he is confused, symbolized by his finger scratching his forehead and wrinkled eyebrow. Therefore one implied meaning could be that the Pope is stuck in his game of *Scrabble*. He is confused about what to do. With his symbolic authority he says, “If you rearrange the letters in the word ‘faith,’ you can spell ‘microwave.’” It is also strengthened by the words underneath

“Don’t test it out, just believe me.” In this symbolic construction, the rhetor wants to point out that using his authority and power, the Pope asks people to have faith without the willingness to be tested.

Thirdly, it is interesting to play with the words in the cartoon, which are also presented in a *Scrabble* box font. It is intriguing to look at why the rhetor strategically chooses the words “faith” and “microwave.” The word “faith” is common to many religions, but is particularly important to Christianity, appearing 338 times in the New American Standard Bible¹²² and 336 times in the King James Version Bible.¹²³ The words “If you rearrange the letters in the word ‘faith,’ you can spell ‘microwave’” also shows the simple impossibility of the command because the letters in the word “faith” can only match the vocal letter “i” and “a” within the words “microwave,” while the rest of the letters do not match. In the *Scrabble* game, it is impossible to rearrange such words. The rhetor wants to challenge the dogmatic principle in Christianity that faith can do anything. That is accomplished by appealing to the audience’s rationality using the metaphor of a simple game. The important point of this message is to push the question whether “faith” can do impossible things not in a big case such as curing cancer or another miracle, but with respect to a small thing like playing *Scrabble*. Nevertheless, when the audience starts to question, they are admonished, “don’t test it, just believe me.” This command echoes Deuteronomy 6:16,¹²⁴ which states, “Do not test the LORD your God.” Both papal and biblical authority prevents believers from questioning the logic of his command.

The fact that “microwave” is offered in contrast to the word “faith” is also significant. The audience may see the word “faith” as something spiritual that is contradictory with the word “microwave,” which is a product of technology and scientific innovation. It may bring the realistic question such as “is the microwave a product of faith?” The answer would be mostly

“no” because the logic of the audience would go to the argument that the microwave is a product of technology and scientific innovation. Additionally, “faith” is believing in something without evidence, and may involve communicating with God or other spiritual entities. Meanwhile, microwave technology is used for point-to-point telecommunication through radio waves with frequencies between 300 MHz (0.3 GHz) and 300 GHz.¹²⁵ Faith is presented as a nebulous concept with no potential to aid human beings. Microwaves, on the other hand, stand in for the many technological achievements that have improved humans’ lives. Sometimes people have to believe in something invisible, untouchable, or something that they cannot experience with their senses. People simply believe, while testing the belief or dogma is also forbidden in the whole belief and/or faith system. In contrast, the microwave is a product of science that can be proven helpful for human beings. The wave may not be seen or felt, but it is real, created by people, and shown to be beneficial for human civilization. The contradiction appears obviously and is not shallow or peripheral. The contradiction is deep and strategic because the more the audience tries to break down the word preferences, the more contradiction they can find.

The burlesque approach in this image appears in the timing of the post, the connection between human power and science, and the critique of religious authority. The image appeared to “counter” the launching of the Apostolic mission in the Year of Faith. It also ridicules the religious group, especially Catholics and the Pope, as the “victim” or the “target” of the burlesque approach. The image also sends a political message that while the religious leader uses his/her authority to lead people to faith, human is science is more trustworthy and reliable. The counter mission of the message is to solidify the identification of atheists’ belief as those who praise science and human power, and also to form the community who always criticizes

believers and religious authorities by mocking them. The confirmation of these rhetorical messages can be identified through the responses of the target audience.

The words in the image, “If you rearrange the letters in the word ‘faith’ you can spell ‘microwave,’” are widely seen on many websites and in discussion forums, which directly discredit the religion its religious leader. For example, these comments below are found in Yahoo and YouTube discussions as the first and second websites in the Google search among 4,920 results under the key sentences “If you rearrange the letters in the word ‘faith’ you can spell ‘microwave,’”

If you rearrange the letters in the word religion, you can spell a destructive worldview for the credulous. Just take my word for it.... or else you will suffer for eternity.¹²⁶

Hilarious one idea and within hours multiple people with their own interpretations. Just two words and people can find 'meaning' to the riddle. A book full of words - well we know where that got us.¹²⁷

The burlesque scapegoating stimulates atheists not to question their lack of belief in God, but rather to solidify their atheism as they debate the cartoon. Other discussions and debates appear to support the statement from the image. For example in reddit.com, one of the atheist forums, 203 comments appear to discuss the image. These commentaries below represent the commentaries that discuss the interpretation of the image:

I can easily rearrange those letters and see that they cannot in fact spell "microwave." The issue with religion is sort of a different matter. They have made their claims unfalsifiable, or untestable. They have altered the definition of God time and time again in order to protect it from being disproved.¹²⁸

I attempted to rearrange the letters to spell microwave, and it worked for me. I just can't show you, so have faith in me.~ Sryzon, humanities savior and prophet of the microwave god¹²⁹

And if you tried to rearrange the letters you would only be able to spell out "666" because questioning the spelling of "faith" is the work of the devil.¹³⁰

Well, both words do share the letters 'i' and 'a'. And the 'f' just looks like an over-developed 'r' so there's that as well. I think that's more than enough evidence to take the rest as true too.¹³¹

Although the imagistic argument rejects religious authority, the written comments suggest that the image functions to invite the audience to discuss the nature of faith, the misuse of authority/control from religion, and the promotion of technology as the alternative comparison to religion.

The continuity of ridiculing the religious symbol of authority exists within the discussions and audience comments. The pattern of employing the burlesque metaphor to humiliate religious figures or symbols of authority emerges in the latent and visible design of the visual discourse. The verbal discussions become a complimentary artifact to endorse the rhetorical design, in which the key concepts were designed within the image. Religion is always connected with the idea of faith as uncontested dogma and it brings further criticism on the relevancy of religion to those who value rational, scientific knowledge. In sum, then, the burlesque rhetorical form that selected images from the atheistic blogosphere cast religion as an authoritarian belief system that imposes an untestable principle on a gullible audience. This audience is derided, fostering animosity between believers and those who identify with the New Atheism movement.

Conclusion: The Burlesque Patterns

In this chapter, I have examined New Atheism's use of burlesque form in selected images and demonstrated the ways in which this strategy creates division between rhetors and targets. Implicitly, the atheists also reveal the symbols that represent their values in comparison to the target's values. The atheists employ some of these patterns.

Firstly, the images considered in this chapter criticize the idea of religious power and authority. The audience is encouraged to question the relevance of religious morality to contemporary standards, while at the same time evaluating the detrimental consequences of religious power in the past. The atheists' burlesque rhetoric is designed to counter the dominant group (believers) who shapes societal standards and governs political decision. The "mission" of the atheist authors of these images is to point out the illogic of the target in using their power. Through this strategy, the atheists identify as the victim of the target's dumb decision. The atheists use the frame of rejection, suggesting that the target's attitudes and values are irrelevant to the contemporary context. Thus, the atheists show the irrelevancy of the target and promote its own value by supporting technology, science, and human power.

Second, the burlesque rhetorical strategy also fosters in-group identification by comparing atheism with other beliefs. The burlesque strategy prompts the audience to think about the target and its mistakes throughout history. As the burlesque rhetorical strategy mocks and scapegoats its targets, it simultaneously fosters dialogue and debate within the group. This tactic then helps individuals to think further about the alternative standpoint of atheism. Since believers are unlikely to spend a lot of time on these websites, the purpose of the debate in the comments is simply to reinforce the audience's identification with New Atheism. Therefore, burlesque rhetorical strategy opens spaces for building identity for atheists through arguments and discussing the atheistic standpoints.

Finally, in this chapter, I have demonstrated how the burlesque approach becomes a salient strategy in disseminating the atheist's message about their target's attitude. The burlesque strategy resists the targets by ridiculing their attitudes, values, and symbols of authority. It also functions to smooth the harsh criticism via laughter and humor, and yet still conveys the message

of ridiculing the target. Not all of the images present in the atheist blogosphere function divisively to separate atheists and believers. In the next chapter, I examine images that embrace the carnivalesque rhetorical form. Not only is this strategy more humane than burlesque appeals; it also promotes dialogue between atheists and those who do not avow an atheistic identity.

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CHAPTER THREE: CARNIVALESQUE IN NEW ATHEISM

I'm an atheist, thank God! - Luis Bunuel, 1900-1983.¹³²

This intriguing quote is an entertaining statement by Luis Bunuel: an atheist, who doesn't believe in God, thanks "God" for being an atheist. The involvement of the atheist in the joke is what Kenneth Burke calls the internal approach.¹³³ The rhetor invites the audience to laugh about the world, existing social constructions, sanctified hierarchy, and sometimes about the rhetor him/herself. The inclusion of the "I" (the rhetor) provides the distinct approach of the carnivalesque as compared to the burlesque approach as noted in chapter two, which involves the external approach.

In my first chapter, I discussed Burke's general theory of frames of rejection and acceptance through the application of burlesque and carnivalesque rhetorical approaches. In the second chapter, I examined the ways in which the burlesque approach is employed through various images from atheist blogs. In this chapter, I analyze how atheist groups employ the carnivalesque rhetorical strategy through images in the blogosphere. As noted in chapter one, carnivalesque rhetorical appeals attempt to balance unequal power relationships. When the structure in the society creates favorable classes and unfavorable classes or over-emphasizes one group and under-emphasizes another group, the carnivalesque thinker will train him/herself as well as the audience to balance the discourse among the social structures.¹³⁴ Moreover, the carnivalesque strategy creates a frame of acceptance as a strategy for living and uses happy "stupidity" as a method of self-protection.¹³⁵ Understanding the carnivalesque approach and reviewing the social context within the visual productions of the atheist movement are the next significant steps in this study. Members of the New Atheist movement use the blogosphere to publish images that employ carnivalesque rhetorical strategies. Additionally, some of these

images are not only published in the blogs but are also circulated in other mass media, such as merchandising, brochures, billboards, etc. The images in this chapter, as opposed to the images in chapter two, are designed to appeal both to an atheistic audience and to a broader public audience. In this chapter, I examine select images from the atheist blogosphere which have gained a broader audience outside of individual blogs and which embody carnivalesque rhetorical strategies.

Carnavalesque Critique of Dominant Culture

As noted in chapter two, atheists are in the minority in the U.S. population. Therefore, they argue against the majority of theist believers in America that there is no proof that God exists. The “nones,” as people who do not subscribe to religious beliefs are sometimes called, identify themselves as atheist, agnostic, humanist, or simply “no religion.” The atheist believes that there is no God (or any kind of gods). Meanwhile, the agnostic takes a more skeptical position of neither believing nor disbelieving in the existence of a deity or deities; that is why they sometimes are called “weak atheists.”¹³⁶ Those who believe that there is no God are included in the extreme pole of atheism. Even though every religion has different doctrines and points of view about its deity/deities, the main premise that God/gods exists is the same in each. Because theism has dominated many societies, both historically and contemporarily, atheists must find a way to encourage the majority to question widely held assumptions. According to Burke, carnivalesque appeals bring existing social constructions into question and encourage the audience to evaluate commonly held assumptions through laughter. Moreover, carnivalesque appeals are designed to open the audience member’s perspective to the possibility of mistakes. Carnavalesque strategies may promote understanding between people who disagree on an issue,

promoting dialogue between variety groups in the society, and inviting people to engage in humorous critique. Through this chapter I argue, not only does carnivalesque rhetoric promote dialogue, but it also serves as a public face for New Atheism and it confirms the beliefs of those who find themselves in a societal minority. Using atheist blogs as a source of information, I examine select images that exemplify the carnivalesque appeals being employed by members of the New Atheism movement.

Playfulness in the Space of Possibility

Since the main premise of atheism is to prove that God does not exist, atheists employing carnivalesque strategies seek to play with this probability in a creative, non-threatening, and even entertaining way. The images discussed below demonstrate the pattern of the carnivalesque rhetorical strategy. These images are suggestive of the ways in which carnivalesque strategies can be more humane and democratic than burlesque strategies. In addition, in their carnivalesque image, atheists will bring in the notion of humanity, wherein the human plays the significant role in his or her own life. This empowering idea can also be seen through some other examples of carnivalesque images in this paper.

An image with words of different sizes and colors was published on August 11, 2011 in the Atheistblog.tumblr.com. Although this image is comprised exclusively of text, its use of color, font size, and other aesthetic features is significant and contributes to its carnivalesque rhetorical form. The sentences in green state, “We are all Atheists about most gods. Some of us just go one god further.” Underneath that sentence, a statement in bright pink states, “There’s probably no god.” Afterwards, the last words in one line, in red, say, “Now stop worrying” and, in the same line, more words in orange say, “and enjoy your life.” There are 80 people who re-

blogged or “liked” this post. This image is taken from one of Richard Dawkins’s quotations.¹³⁷

This quotation also gained fame after being used widely in billboards, atheist merchandise, blogs, websites, and articles with similar design. The complete quotation from Dawkins is “We are all atheists about most of the gods that societies have ever believed in. Some of us just go one god further.”



(Figure 5-“We are all atheist,” *Atheist Blog Tumblr*)¹³⁸

The message suggests that our ability to choose our beliefs is one thing that contributes to diversity among people. That diversity, however, need not be a source of division. The carnivalesque appeal attempts to negotiate the identity of the rhetor and the audience by uniting them as one. It also provides a space for the probability and improbability of the existence of god, and it encourages the audience to reflect on the ways in which their belief system impacts their quality of life.

First, the carnivalesque approach reconciles the separateness of the audience and the atheists by uniting them in similarity and differences. The rhetor selects an interesting quote from Dawkins, which starts with the word “we.” The word “we” includes the subjects “I” and

“you,” reconciling the “you” and “I” together as one. The word “all” strengthens the wholeness of the “I” or the writer, and “you” the audience or reader, with no exclusion. The words “We are all atheists about most gods,” strengthens the meaning, that you and I, with no exclusions, are non-believers regarding many kind of gods.

The gradation of the font size between these words is also significant. The incremental change in the font sizes encourage audience members to focus on what they share rather than what they disagree about. It unites the “we” who are atheists “about many gods” with the “they” who are atheists about all gods; at the same time, it acknowledges that some of “us” choose to believe in one “god.” The dynamic of reconciling the “we” in a similar way while separating those who choose one “god” is a smart move that reflects a carnivalesque sensibility. It also modifies the word “atheist” to be less scary or strange because the carnivalesque strategy reveals the “atheism” within an individual is not a weird thing because everyone is atheist in some way. In other words, it invites the audience realize the “atheist” within themselves. Moreover, the smaller font size of “some of us just go one god further” encourages people to realize that the choice of believing in a god makes an individual’s identity different from another’s. However, the similarity of the “atheism within” in every individual or the “we” remains the biggest message.

The choice of colors in the sentence also is rhetorically significant. Color is a permeating perceptual experience that can function as a visual stimulus for human beings.¹³⁹ Color not only has aesthetic value but it also can communicate specific information.¹⁴⁰ Although the meaning of particular colors can vary across cultures, psychological research has developed a correlation between certain colors and associated traits or characteristics that people connect to those colors.¹⁴¹

The choice of green may lead the perception of growing. According to Anna Wierzbicka, green is an additive primary color and has the etymological and historical root of a tangible growing thing.¹⁴² The human experience of seeing the vegetative growth such as grass, trees, and herbs anchored this association into human interpretation.¹⁴³ Green also can symbolize concepts related to growth such as fertility, hope, and life.¹⁴⁴ Green in pagan ceremonies in Europe also related to the coming renewal and emergence of life.¹⁴⁵ Additionally, green is also related to psychological growth and development, and has been associated with creativity and innovation.¹⁴⁶ Therefore, the green used in the visual representation of the Dawkins quotation encourages the audience to associate atheism with the emergence of new ideas, creativity, and innovation. The reader is invited to identify with the “we” who are atheists and is then subtly rewarded for that identification through the positive associations with the color green.

Second, the message functions to invite the audience to enter the space of probability and improbability regarding the existence of God. The next words that the rhetor writes are “There’s probably no god. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” The use of the word “probably” creates ambiguity and uncertainty. It offers a space of possibility and an area for the audience to believe in their own interpretation; however, it also challenges the dominant culture’s assumption that God exists. An impression of playfulness represented by the color pink, consistent with the sentence “There’s probably no god,” encourages audience members to think less dogmatically about “god.”

Third, the carnivalesque image is designed to empower the audience to reflect on their lives. The words “Now stop worrying and enjoy your life” minimize the authority of religions that sometimes push believers to be afraid of the life after death via such concepts as heaven, purgatory, hell, etc. Through the boldness of the carnivalesque approach, the rhetor invites the

audience to think about the improbability of god and the biggest impact of having no god: relief from the worry about heaven and hell, condemnation and torture after death, etc. Additionally, the red color of the words signals authority, intensifying the command, “Now stop worrying.” Furthermore, the words “and enjoy your life” underscore the value of atheism that emphasizes the power of the human and his/her ownership of life.¹⁴⁷ The words “your life” and the image reinforce this ownership with the word “enjoy” as an active participant of a human in his or her life. According to Ian Paterson in the interpretation of the lexicon of language of color, the color orange relates to the perception of an unconventional life, amusement, and functions as a symbol of entertainment in life.¹⁴⁸ This color, therefore, is consistent with the verbal message “enjoy your life.” The combination of orange color and the words “enjoy your life” are designed to invoke feelings of amusement, encouraging the audience to explore life without worrying about the religious rules that limit the entertaining part of life.

Even though the image consists primarily of words, the color, font size, and other aesthetic dimensions of the image enhance the image’s carnivalesque impact. The image lets the audience be playful, evaluates the dominant culture’s concept of God’s existence, and encourages non-atheists to identify more closely with atheists. The role of the carnivalesque in this image is to counter the dominant paradigm through the negotiation of identity. Assessment of the blog comments, which accompanied the image, indicates that although the carnivalesque appeal did not necessarily prompt anyone to change their beliefs, it did promote dialogue.

As the subject matter is relatively volatile, since there is no moderator to control the posting of the message or the dynamic of the discussion in the blog, the development of the issue is also uncontrolled. The public can discuss and debate the existing issue and develop it in

various directions. The following discussion is an example a debate between these two bloggers about the image:

Robyn: Interesting sign. I think most people agree that the Gods of the past that were worshiped are generally now considered silly. Certainly there are people today that say even this last one standing is silly. But, the sign just concludes there is *probably* no God. And the aim is to just get people to enjoy life. I like it, but I personally believe there is no way to empirically prove the existence or non existence of God. I don't think it's meant to be known.¹⁴⁹

Taylor Buston-Edwards: Bosco, Good analysis of the problem. And a wonderful response via the apophatic way. The reality, I think, is that many theists really are atheists– not in an apophatic sense, but in the very way you noted the atheists here misconstrue God as an object out there about which the key issue is whether we believe in its existence or agree about particular attributes of it rather than whether we actually relate to such a thing/One as Mystery/Other/Sovereign Love and live that way, or whether our “belief” is just one of a number of other things– a collection of attributes or flair, if you will– we put onto the avatar we call self.¹⁵⁰

Gilt: Here's another way of looking at it: As a theist (is that a safe assumption?) do you think your lack of belief in the Flying Spaghetti Monster or Zeus or Chronos differs in any meaningful way from that of a self-described atheist? Follow-up query: what's your rationale for not believing in these mythical creatures?¹⁵¹

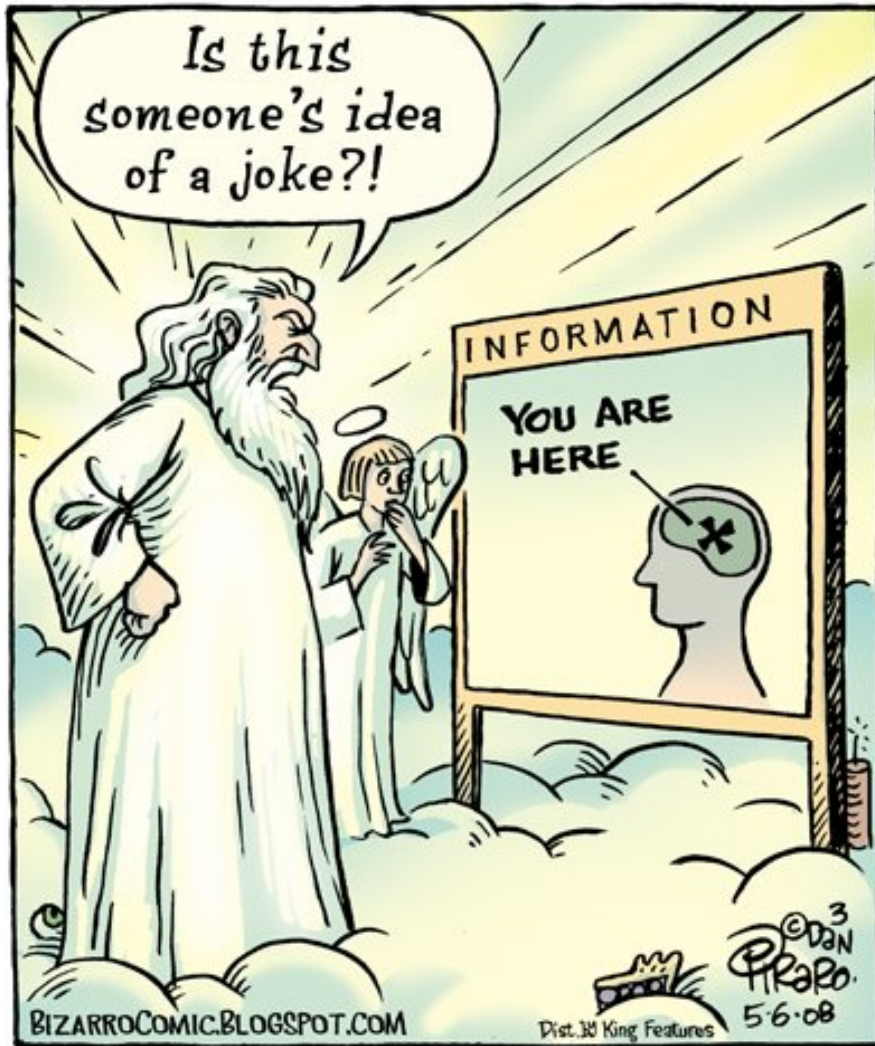
The carnivalesque image, then, functions to promote atheist discourse among a wider audience and to allow further discussion through interactive nature of blogs and attractiveness of carnivalesque image. In this verbal discussions and audience comments, the atheistic idea is related closely to the arguments of “We are all atheists about most gods.” The audience debated the belief in one God/gods. The discussions become an artifact confirming the rhetorical design, in which the metaphor's key concepts were designed within the image. The carnivalesque message invites the audience to question the idea of monotheism, atheism, and polytheism. Some audience members may agree and appreciate the idea of “we are all atheists,” some of them may still try to defend their belief by arguing more on the issue, and some audience members strengthen this idea when they agree with it. The carnivalesque image opens the discussion on “we are all atheist” by creative words combination and colors, and puts that in the blog to

encourage interactivity and audience discussion. The debate of true believers, in the discourse of “Truth,” is softly played by the rhetors. When many people think that, above most of the gods that people believe in, their gods/god is the correct one, the atheist then plays with the possibility: what if everything is wrong and what if there is no god?

Question of the Social Hierarchy and Human Empowerment

In questioning existing social constructions, carnivalesque images may involve arguments regarding the validity of a premise. Both atheists and believers press their opponents to provide support for their beliefs about the existence or non-existence of God. Answering these questions is not easy and sometimes requires long explanations. However, via the carnivalesque approach, atheists can offer shorter, more entertaining answers to difficult questions. The strategy also allows atheists to replace belief in a deity with an alternative belief system. In this section, I argue that the carnivalesque strategy questions existing social constructions and offers the idea of human empowerment as atheism’s alternative value.

I selected two images that represent the carnivalesque approach to questioning social constructions, images that promote human empowerment as a replacement for faith. The images propose that God exists in a human’s mindset and invert the “in God we trust” logic that places God above humans in the cosmic hierarchy. These images suggest that God exists via human construction as do associated religious myths (e.g., angels, heaven and hell, Satan, etc.). Although the images are comedic, they promote the serious claim that humans, not God, are the ultimate creators.



(Figure 6-“You are here,” *Atheist Comic*)¹⁵²

An image shows an old man with white robes, a white beard, and hair. His face looks angry, looking at an information board with a picture of a human’s head and an arrow pointing to the brain that says: “YOU ARE HERE.” The angel near the old man also wears a white long robe, has wings, and has a shining golden circle above his head. The angel looks worried and surprised. The white old man angrily says, “Is this someone’s idea of a joke?!” Both the man and angel are standing on the clouds. The background of the image has lines, representing the shine that comes from the old man.

The concept that the image tries to promote is discussed in some blogs and other websites. This image appeared in the *Atheist Comic* blog, and there are 30 comments in response. Additionally, the same image appeared in a couple of other blogs and websites, namely [sodahead.com](#),¹⁵³ [dula.tv](#),¹⁵⁴ [henbuddism.com](#) blog,¹⁵⁵ and an atheist blog named [gedzo.com](#).¹⁵⁶ The image also appears on *Friendly Atheist* Tumblr, and 147 visitors re-blogged and “liked” the picture.¹⁵⁷

The image counters the premise that God exists. The atheists argue that, indeed, God exists, but in the human brain. This argument is delivered via carnivalesque form insofar as it is a humorous portrayal of how God would ostensibly react to the knowledge that he exists only in the brains of human beings who believe in him. Rather than belittling believers, the cartoon exalts human intelligence and pokes fun at the supposed omniscience of God. First, this image has a carnivalesque approach that involves the idea of “in the beginning, man created God,” one of the quotes of atheism appearing in various atheist merchandise, advertisements, and other promotional media.¹⁵⁸ However, using the carnivalesque approach, the concept of “God is in the human’s mind” can be softened through humor. The image also shows the picture of some kind of “God,” represented by an image of a shining old man with a white beard and white hair, accompanied by an angel. This carnivalesque approach is interesting because of its polysemous potential. The existence of God in the picture can open the possibility that God may exist and may be antagonistic to the idea that “man created God through his mind.” Therefore, the rhetor does not push the idea that God does not exist. The rhetor opens the possibility that God may exist through the image of God, the shining man. However, the rhetor also suggests the bigger possibility that God does not exist by making the “God” representation look angry and by “caricaturing” God. The idea that man created God contradicts religious teachings. The “God” in

the cartoon is also portrayed as someone who is angry when asking, “Is this someone’s idea of a joke?!” This is an expression of someone who thinks the joke is not funny, while others think the joke is funny.¹⁵⁹ God looks very human-like, as reflected through his facial expression, and the angel, as his assistant, looks worried and surprised. The expressions make those two figures look less supernatural, less omnipotent, and less spiritual. Humans will ask whether this “angry God” has punished this atheist who disobeyed the religious teaching. Since nothing really happens, then God is either doing nothing, is weak, or does not exist. “Humanizing” and “cartooning” the image of “God” leads the audience to imagine God as a figure with less power. The existence of the “angry God” with a human image strengthens the unlikelihood of God’s existence by making it like a cartoon, fable, or tale. Hence, the carnivalesque approach brings the high image of “God” down to earth and turns the “God” image upside down.¹⁶⁰

Secondly, the carnivalesque approach is designed to prompt the audience to question a taboo construction through laughter. A smart hidden detail of the picture near the information board is a picture of a time bomb. The fuse of the time bomb is quite short, and represents that the bomb may destroy the “heaven” in the image, where the “God” and “angel” exist. The time bomb also reflects that, while the idea of God is from man’s brain, the existence of God, the angel, heaven, and all that will be destroyed. This detail represents how the carnivalesque approach challenges the hegemonic genre in the social discourse about the existence of God, angels, and heaven.¹⁶¹ Putting the time bomb in the image provides the possibility to rebut the taboo perspective via destroying the existence of God and heaven in humanity’s life, which is not a big deal in caricature.

Finally, the involvement of the rhetor appears in the interaction between the words “you are here” and “is this someone’s idea of a joke?!” Using the word “You” as the opposite of “I”

shows bravery in talking to God, that “I” think “You are here.” The words “someone’s idea” also show the ownership by a human being who created the concept of “You are here.” Therefore, the rhetor is involved in the image and is portrayed as the one who makes a joke about God. The rhetor can also be seen as one who asserts that “man created God,” while ironically creating the caricature about the God who is angry with them. Thus, the carnivalesque appeal invites the non-atheistic audience not only to re-think the existence of God, but also provides them with a bit of comic relief as they contemplate an angry God reacting to the assertion that he does not exist. The discourse invites the audience, in an entertaining way, to discuss the arguments that God exists in the human brain. It also invites the audience to be brave in looking at the God figure and hierarchy through a caricature. The continuity of such questioning of the social hierarchy about God endures in the audience comments.

Werner: No, its not a Joke, its Reality!!!!!!!!!!!!¹⁶²

katlyng420: Well done. It's funny that God's gotta info kiosk.¹⁶³

ElCapitan: If heaven exists, what would you like god to say when you arrive at the pearly gates? "That's right, you're having a stroke."¹⁶⁴

Anonymous: heaven is a place on earth - like in my brain when the nerve reactions get my hormone levels high (or actually - as it is done on earth so it shall be tributed to the church, but that’s something different)¹⁶⁵

The comments indicate the existence of the entertaining point from the image and the awareness of the detail symbol within the image. The key concept that humans created God is disseminated through the entertaining strategy of the image and the combined symbol within the image. The spirit of bravery from atheism in challenging the social hierarchy also invites the audience to join in the same spirit through the freedom of expression in the commentary section. Although, these comments cannot exemplify the views of non-atheists and the atheist

commentary is actually fairly non-democratic, these comments can illustrate the boundary of carnivalesque discourse. I argued previously that carnivalesque strategy promotes dialogue through disarming the audience with humor. However, sometimes with highly volatile subjects, the carnivalesque images may have limitations. It may not be powerful enough to disarm one's audience, especially to attract the non-atheist audience. Nevertheless, carnivalesque image is still able to embolden atheists to avow their identity publicly through an attractive message. Next, the idea of God as a myth emerges as an alternative rebuttal to the affirmative argument of the existence of God.



(Figure 7-“American Atheist New Christmas Billboard Campaign,” *The Pantheos Blog and Friendly Atheist*)¹⁶⁶

This image appeared in the Friendly Atheist Blogs on November 13, 2011 as an image that lead into the discussion of myth issue in theist and atheist. I selected this image because the image firstly came up as a billboard from American Atheist's "You Know It's a Myth" Campaign and reposted in the blog. In 2010, the atheist group conducted a campaign by placing billboards with the theme "You Know It's a Myth, This Season Celebrate Reason." In 2011, the atheist group used the image as an advertisement for the same campaign during the Christmas season. In their campaign, they placed a billboard in the west end of the Lincoln Tunnel, under the Hudson River. This tunnel connects Weehawken, New Jersey and the region of Manhattan in

New York City. The tunnel carries 120,000 vehicles per day, 1,700 buses, and 62,000 commuters. Consequently, Lincoln Tunnel is one of the busiest tunnels in the world.¹⁶⁷ The 2011 billboard also created public discussion,¹⁶⁸ prompted a Christmas holiday public debate,¹⁶⁹ and fostered discourse about religious advertisements in the public area. Thus, the advertisement produced a counter-public message in the public sphere.

The words “37 million Americans know MYTHS when they see them,” show the involvement of the communicator in the advertisement. The words also provide statistical data about the number of the non-affiliated to religion population: 37 million Americans. According to the *New York Times*,¹⁷⁰ the billboard, with the dominant colors of orange and black, cost \$ 25,000 for placement. David Silverman, The President of American Atheists, argued that the purpose of the billboard was to “call out” to the atheists to confess honestly about who they are.¹⁷¹

The billboard not only brings the message of atheism’s values, but it also emphasizes their objective in conveying their cultural visions to challenge hegemonic beliefs. The atheist group offers a challenging perspective on four figures as myths. They also send a message about social values using the statistical data that there are many atheists in the U.S. They also convey the political message that those who do not affiliated them selves in any religion which included the atheists too are not in the minority anymore because 37 million people is more than 10% of the total of the U.S. population, larger than the populations of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, or Jews in the U.S.¹⁷²

The billboard shows the carnivalesque approach by questioning the hierarchy inherent in social perception: Jesus as a figure on the top and Satan or the Devil as a figure down in hell. Here, though, both Jesus and Satan are together in one line, the typical approach of

deconstructing the social structure or decoding dominant structure.¹⁷³ The advertisement also encourages people not fear (or revere) sanctified things.

The atheist group used four figures. First, the atheist group used Neptune, the God of the sea according to the ancient Roman mythology, similar to the Greek myth of Poseidon.¹⁷⁴ Neptune is a God who lives under the water, wears a beard and holds a trident. Secondly, they placed an image of Jesus, the “holy figure” of Christianity; Jesus is considered the “Son of God” in the Trinity. The classical picture of Jesus, with the dominant color of red and his opened heart, could be associated with a Catholic image in the devotion of “Immaculate Heart” or “The Most Sacred Heart of Jesus.” Jesus’s color and image contrasts with Neptune’s, through the yellow background and the dominant red and blue colors, while Neptune has blue and crème as dominant colors. However, they have a similarity in physical appearance with beards and long hair.

Third, the atheist group used the picture of Santa Claus with a red jacket, white beard, white hat, and black background color. Santa Claus is a figure in legend and folklore in western culture. He brings gifts to obedient children on Christmas Eve, and, even in the modern era, Santa's story still exists in various movies from Hollywood. The image of Santa Claus is popular in the U.S. and Canada with his red coat, white collar and long, white beard.¹⁷⁵ The image of Santa Claus contrasts in color with the image of the Devil or Satan. The Devil or Satan’s image has a white background color, red face, and long horns on the head. The image amplifies the contemporary portrayal of Satan through the black suit and red tie. Satan also is pictured in a suit with an exaggerated smile on his face. The incongruent shapes of Satan as the gothic old myth with modern suit makes him looks like someone who wear Halloween mask to invoke uniqueness or perhaps bizarreness of Satan image in contemporary impression. This

makes him look more comic than diabolical or as a grotesque impression such as Satan's metamorphosis in his existence throughout the time.

The juxtaposition of the four figures in the image is notable as well. Neptune and Jesus are popular figures and come from Roman backgrounds, although Neptune lives down in the deep ocean while Jesus lives up in the sky. However, similar classical European-style pictures for both Jesus and Neptune were chosen. While Santa and Satan or Devil have similar red, white, and black dominant colors, the billboard placement shows a contrast to each other side-by-side. However, both the Santa and Devil images reflect modern images, while Jesus and Neptune, with their classical or traditional costumes, symbolize the past or ancient figures. Thus, the advertisement conveys the message of the dimension of time to emphasize the similarity of the four figures.

The construction of the pictures is also intriguing. Both Neptune and Santa become the bridge to portray Jesus and Satan as myths. Neptune and Santa are myths or legends in U.S. social construction, while Jesus and Satan are "believed in" as figures of heaven and hell in religious tradition, especially in Christianity. This image deconstructs the hierarchy and invites the audience to escape from their communal norm through a rhetorical work of art,¹⁷⁶ challenging hegemonic genres, ideologies, and symbols, articulating the taboo point of view, and criticizing the accepted point of view in society.¹⁷⁷

The carnivalesque appeal is articulated not only by the comic portrayal of the four figures in the image; it also opens up interpretive space with the question, "What myths do you see?" Rather than belittling theism (as do burlesque appeals), this image leaves space for dialogue. The atheist group did not say "you see them as myth" to the audience or "dictate to" the audience the perception of the four figures as myth. Instead, they pose a reflective question to

the audience. The open question regarding the sanctified figures not only provides space for the audience to believe in their own interpretation of the figures, but it also allows different interpretations that challenge the dominant construction. The presentation of individual words adds to the image's rhetorical force. The italicized "you" emphasizes human agency and the power individuals and cultures have to construct symbols, figures, and structures. In other words, the image suggests that "you" are the one who decides who the four figures are. Additionally, the word "see" as an action verb functions to emphasize the active participation of humans in their perception. The audience can still maintain the majority/accepted point of view, if they want, but it also allows the challenge of the construction with the word "myth."

The carnivalesque strategy in Figure 7, "What Myth Do You See?," is an image that appears to emerge from existing atheist discourse. The image introduces the possibility that not everybody believes the sacred figures in the same way as the majority. The public then discusses the image in various media. Members of the public may express their visual experience through disagreement, agreement, or indifference. However, the main point is that the power of the image in a public area can provide the opportunity for the audience to (re) evaluate their beliefs. The (re) assessment of their own beliefs can be seen not only in the atheist blogs but also other resources such as religious-based websites or religion online discussion forum. I follow the presence of the same image from Google search or through the atheist friendly blog discussion/link. The image has gained public attention and presents in various websites and blogs; therefore I pulled out some comments and statements in these websites that provide interpretation on the same image. For example, the American Atheist reaction that is quoted by the Christian Post is that the image is only to encourage people to ask about their own beliefs. They say, "The purpose is to encourage people to ask themselves why one god is different from

gods they call myths.”¹⁷⁸ A statement that questioned social phenomenon related to the billboard and posted on the Christian Post website also notes that,

If they look at our billboard and see four myths, including Jesus, then why are they going to church and donating money? Why are they going through this ridiculous motion of pretending to believe in a myth, just to please other people?¹⁷⁹

Another statement in the same blog but from a different person confirmed his/her own believe towards the myth issue.

Billboards like this should be treated as an opportunity. Christians should use this as a conversation starter. If I saw the board, with Santa, Jesus and demons, and was asked how many myths I saw, I would say one, Santa Claus (which is not St. Nicholas). Jesus was/is real. Demons are very real.¹⁸⁰

Another statement from Bruce Gleason from the Backyard Sceptics quoted by the OcWeekly Blog and also Friendly Atheist Blog says,

It is hard for people who are indoctrinated in a religious belief with many superstitions to look at their beliefs as myths, but it's amazing that the same people look at the other religions and call them superstitions and myths. This seems like a perfect case of confirmation bias and cognitive dissonance.¹⁸¹

The image tries to question the dominant discourse and introduce a number of people who don't have the same perspective as the dominant group.

Following this statement, some members of the audience also confirm that the image helped them to confirm their beliefs as “non-believers.” Some comments from the audience include,

I was raised Roman Catholic and never believed any of it. One or two of these billboards would have reassured me that there wasn't something wrong with me when I was 12 and couldn't talk to anyone about my non belief. Maybe they will help someone else feel that.¹⁸²

However, other comments, which disagree with the statement of the images, also appear. For example,

Jesus is a myth? He never lived? There is historical proof that he existed. And Atheists often point to Jesus' birth as crazy, but don't look at the resurrection which is the most important believe to Christians. Why would so many of the apostles be killed and tortured for a myth? There is much historical proof there.¹⁸³

If folks want to engage in an honest conversation, I would be happy to share my testimony. If they just want to be petty about my beliefs, well, that's on them, that doesn't hurt me, or change my faith.¹⁸⁴

Some other comments in Friendly Atheist blog capture similar interpretation with the interpretation I argue above. This shows how audience is thoughtful enough to understand how the rhetorical strategy works to gain audience attention. These comments are substantial as supporting data to see the contributions of the audience in engaging the meaning of the images.

Great billboard! Although I wish they had chosen a different picture of the devil. That one just looks strange (why is he wearing a suit?) and the mask is a little on the grotesque side. The last thing we need is for atheists to be accused of scaring "the children," LOL.¹⁸⁵

I think they perfected this billboard. It will be difficult for the religious to complain (although I am sure they will) as they are not saying anything negative, but simply asking a question.¹⁸⁶

The message cannot be too subtle either. It has to be interesting. It has to create some sort of emotion; otherwise, it's forgettable.¹⁸⁷

The smartness of carnivalesque in turning the world norm and order upside down challenges the status quo, comforts those who agree, and invites those who disagree to evaluate or question their own beliefs. These comments in the blogs illustrate not only the diversity of reactions but also the dialogue. The comic nature of carnivalesque image invites the audience to discuss not only through offline interaction when they see the billboard of the image, but also through online interaction in the blog. The carnivalesque image also functions as the “public face” for New Atheism especially through the power of the image in bringing the discourse of

atheism in a public sphere. Through this image, the counter-public message can be emboldened to fight the singular notion of “god exists.”

Conclusion: Atheists’ Criticism through Images

In this chapter, I have examined the way in which selected images on atheist websites employ carnivalesque rhetorical form. Carnavalesque appeals are designed to playfully mock dominant viewpoints, offering alternative ways to understand the world through laughter, and, at the same time, question social norms. In this chapter, I have demonstrated how atheists want to engage the notion of the diversity of religious “Truths,” the probability of the non-existence of God, of man creating God, and that God is perhaps only a myth.

When employing a carnivalesque approach in their visual discourse, proponents of New Atheism counter the status quo and offer the “atheist good news.” Through carnivalesque images, atheists reconcile their perspectives and identity within society. The counter-message of atheism is not an easy concept since religious people dominate society. However, the atheists use symbols, images, and humor to introduce their ideas. Atheists perform via a more “friendly” and “intellectual” persona in delivering their message, especially to those who still hesitate about their own beliefs. First, using laughter, caricature, and images helps the atheist to summarize their beliefs in a simple and friendly way. Second, audience members can invest each polysemous image with meaning that corresponds to their own interpretations and beliefs, opening up space for dialogue. Using a question mark, for example, makes the carnivalesque appeal more tentative than the more strident burlesque accusation. Through carnivalesque rhetoric, the atheists move outwards to wider publics, openly engaging those who contest atheistic beliefs.

NOTES

¹³² “Luis Bunuel Quote,” *Aphelis*, February 5, 2012, <http://aphelis.net/luis-bunuels-aphorism-god-im-atheist/> (Accessed February 5, 2013).

¹³³ Kenneth Burke, *Attitude Towards History*, Third Edition with A New Afterword (Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, Ltd., 1984).

¹³⁴ Burke, *Attitude Towards History*.

¹³⁵ Burke, *Attitude Towards History*, 41.

¹³⁶ “Agnostic,” *Merriam-Webster dictionary*, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/agnostic> (Accessed February 1, 2013).

¹³⁷ “Richard Dawkins,” *Quotations by Author*, http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Richard_Dawkins/ (Accessed January 15, 2013).

¹³⁸ “We are all atheist,” *Atheist Blog Tumblr*, August 11, 2011, <http://atheistsblog.tumblr.com/post/8334806300> (Accessed January 14, 2013).

¹³⁹ Andrew J. Elliot and Markus A. Maier, “Color and Psychological Functioning,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 16, 5 (2007): 250-254.

¹⁴⁰ Elliot and Maier, *Color and Psychological Functioning*.

¹⁴¹ Stephanie Lichtenfeld, Andrew J. Elliot, Markus A. Maier, and Reinhard Pekrun, “Fertile Green: Green Facilitates Creative Performance,” *Society for Personality and Social Psychology*, 38, 6 (2012): 784-79.

¹⁴² Lichtenfeld, Elliot, Maier, Pekrun, *Fertile Green*. Look also: Anna Wierzbicka, “The meaning of color terms: semantics, culture, and cognition,” *Cognitive Linguistic*, 1 (1990): 99-150.

¹⁴³ Elliot and Maier, *Color and Psychological Functioning*.

¹⁴⁴ Liechtenfeld, Elliot, Maier, Pekrun, *Fertile Green*.

¹⁴⁵ Liechtenfeld, Elliot, Maier, Pekrun, *Fertile Green*.

¹⁴⁶ Liechtenfeld, Elliot, Maier, Pekrun, *Fertile Green*

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CHAPTER FOUR

When people reflect on a nation's diversity, they often point to demographics or face-to-face interactions to evaluate cultural attitudes of the different groups and toward each other. In Chapter One, I mentioned a study by the University of Minneapolis about the stigmatization of atheists as an example of public attitude. This chapter, however, offers another standpoint on public attitudes, in particular, on the attitude toward religious believers and non-believers. I examine the examples of two types of rhetorical appeals employed in the atheist blogosphere. This analysis examines the rhetorical strategies of carnivalesque and burlesque in atheist visual production, which is noticeable in contemporary culture and digital media. These two types of rhetorical appeals are employed in the atheist blogosphere. Although the increased legitimizations of atheistic beliefs are, themselves, historic,¹⁸⁸ we must also recognize the significance of the discursive symbols and images inspired by the emergence of the New Atheist movement in the U.S.

This thesis aims not only to identify the burlesque and carnivalesque strategies of images in the blogosphere, but also to contribute to the understanding of how symbols function in religious discourse in the U.S. First, the images embolden the message of atheism and help atheist groups participate in the public arena. Second, the images invite the audience to fight, question, and criticize the dominant religious perspective in the U.S. In this chapter, I analyze how those two contributions remain salient in the New Atheist movement. I first investigate the connection between the theoretical approach of counter publics and the function of atheist images. Next, I scrutinize the ways in which atheists encourage their audience to fight, question, and criticize dominant norms and culture.

When the Atheists are the Counter Public

Because most religions offer no valid mechanism by which their core beliefs can be tested and revised, each new generation of believers is condemned to inherit the superstitions and tribal hatreds of its predecessors.¹⁸⁹

As one of the New Atheism movement's leaders, Sam Harris challenges the possibility of validation, testing, and even revising the religious values. Harris encourages criticism, discussion, and debate. Many atheists also produce jokes, articles, and arguments to test the logic of religious values, dogma, and attitudes. In this digital media era, the atheist has more freedom to criticize and argue about religious dogma.

The atheist's message has been condemned throughout history. Atheism has also been wrongly associated with communism, Nazism, and other "immoral" belief systems.¹⁹⁰ Within those systems, atheists remained marginalized in the public sphere. As a minority in a sphere where alternatives perspective can be dominated or excluded, the atheist appears as the counter public.¹⁹¹ Eventually, atheists joined together as people with similar ideas, to overcome their exclusion.¹⁹²

Digital media offer the chance for counter publics to disseminate their message in the public sphere. Through the Internet, atheist groups communicate their values publicly. Additionally, the Internet allows atheists to attract their own community, new atheist "believers," and a broader public. Atheists use these as the opportunities to enter the competition in the media market place.

Atheists utilize strategic tactics for communicating in the public sphere, to deliver the message in a way that grabs media and public attention. One example is to create messages that engage people's emotions, such as happiness, sadness, or anger. An image can involve an

audience's emotions, such as sadness, or even send a provocative message, to bring the discourse into wider public discussion.

In the following sections, I describe the roles of atheists as a counter public in terms of burlesque and carnivalesque images. First, burlesque images in atheists' blogs foster their own identity and help them develop their belief system. Second, carnivalesque images help atheists to move outward and challenge the dominant public sphere.

Burlesque Images are used for Building Identity

In the second chapter, I discussed the rhetorical strategies of the burlesque approach in atheist visual productions. The atheist uses intellectual issues, technological association, and historical narrative, as well as promoting atheistic interpretations and evaluations of the dominant religious groups. The main purpose of atheists' burlesque images is to criticize the power of religion and point out the irrelevance and outmoded judgment of religious values to contemporary standards. As an alternative to replace "God" and religion, atheists offer human empowerment through technological development and science. This is the activity of counter publics, to create enclaves to establish their identity.

Enclaves enable atheists to identify their exclusion from the dominant publics. Burlesque appeals help to solidify the identity of the atheist enclaves. As an external approach, burlesque creates friction and separation between the atheists and the dominant religious group. Burlesque images and symbols seek to point out the stupidity, mistakes, and irrelevance of the dominant religious groups.

Using the burlesque approach, atheists challenge the dominance of religion in society. Atheists point out the authoritative tools of religion, such as religious leaders and the attitude of

religious people who bow down to “God.” Burlesque strategy functions to bring down these authoritative tools by laughing at them as ridiculous objects.

The atheists not only criticize the authority of religion, but also develop arguments about the ways in which power is misused by religion. For example, they point to the history of the death penalty from a religious perspective as irrelevant to current moral standards. Religious leaders use their power to impose these death penalty standard as shown in Figure One of Chapter Two. They also juxtapose current searches for answers and hope through the Internet with the religious efforts through prayers, which are demonstrated in Figure Two of Chapter Two. This image shows the unequal position between believers and “God.” Finally, the burlesque image also demonstrates the misuse of religious authority through the doctrine of faith as a way to force individuals to believe the impossibility by using the example of *Scrabble* games image in Figure Three of Chapter Two.

As a replacement for “God” and religion, atheists offer science and technology. Through visual rhetoric, proponents of New Atheism identify humanity as the empowering figure who utilized technology and science to further develop their civilization. In this burlesque strategy, the atheist presents the atheist identity, as the advocate of science, intellectuality, human empowerment, and technological development.

Enclaves serve as a safe space to rearticulate the atheist identity; they may isolate the groups from healthy discussion and criticism with outsider. To maintain healthy tension, the counter publics need to confront the dominant publics through interaction. The way to challenge ideas to wider publics is to criticize the existing social construction through different media and approaches. In the context of this thesis, the carnivalesque is used to contest the idea of Gods’ existences.

Carnavalesque Serves to Forge Connection

In the third chapter, I examined the rhetorical strategy of carnivalesque in atheistic visual production. The atheist carnivalesque submits its perspectives, questions, and more secular values to open discussion in the public sphere. The combinations of the atheists' carnivalesque words and images function as mass-mediated frames that make their cultural point of view more understandable, eye catching, and vivid. Therefore, the images encourage public interaction. Atheistic carnivalesque images chiefly contest the main premise of God's existence. The atheists argue through carnivalesque images that God exists as myth in the human brain, and that there are multiple "truths," which confuse people. The main premise of atheism is that God does not exist. Again, as an alternative replacement for "God/gods," the atheist chiefly self-identifies as a supporter of human empowerment. Humans, in atheist perspectives, are the "gods" who create God, who can control their own lives, who are the intellectuals, and who can help themselves.

Atheists' carnivalesque images are instrumental in expanding their discourse to wider publics that consist of those who are uncomfortable with hegemonic perspectives, who share atheists' beliefs, or who are indifferent. The movement of atheists into the public arena increases counter-public efficacy by expanding their public vocabulary and (re) articulating their identity. Then, the public expansion enables the counter public to invite others to contest their own premises and compare them with the dominant premise.

Through carnivalesque imagery, atheists perform as a counter public that expands the public vocabulary about God. The dominant vocabulary about God assumes God's existence and regards God as the creator of humanity. Atheists contest this premise by presenting humans as the creators and God as something created by humanity. They introduce the idea that we are all atheists. Through the maneuvers of carnivalesque that challenge or question the dominant social

construction inspired by religion, atheists as counter publics disturb the “unjust participatory privilege enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies.”¹⁹³ Using the new vocabularies about “God” via the entertaining approach of carnivalesque, the atheists can make their alternative identity and perspectives understandable to the public.

The counter statement uses carnivalesque images to disseminate its messages. For example, the caricature of an angry God makes the almighty personae of God more human; juxtaposing images of “God” with other myths may undermine the position of God; and familiarizing atheism by suggesting that everybody is an atheist may invite questioning of God’s inexistence. Through humor, entertainment, and attractive combinations of idioms and images, atheists use their rhetorical style to appeal to the wider public.

The carnivalesque style in atheists’ visual productions also strengthens their identity as supporters of humanity through supporting intellectuality, playfulness, and entertainment. The carnivalesque images involve the word “you,” emphasizing the freedom of individuals to believe whatever they want, and demonstrating the importance of human empowerment as the intellectual body that controls one’s life and “God.” The message within the carnivalesque imagery lets the atheist playfully participate in the dominant discourse and lets the public openly contest atheism’s values. The combinations of words, visual imagery, color composition, and word size provide attractive messages to the wider public as noted in Chapter Three. Through a carnivalesque approach, atheists can invite others to contest their own identity.

Counter publics circulate and enact oppositional identity by inviting wider publics to participate in the discourse of atheism. Public spheres are not only fields for the development of discursive perspective; but it is also an area for the enactment of social identities.¹⁹⁴ By joining

the public sphere, atheists enact their alternative and oppositional identity and engage in debate with wider publics to test ideas.

Both the use of enclaves and oscillation between burlesque and carnivalesque images enable atheists to participate in the public sphere as a counter public. Burlesque and carnivalesque rhetoric operates to disseminate counter discourse and strengthen atheist identity. The media that is used for this visual imagery may also construct the framework of burlesque and carnivalesque to invite the audience to participate in the discourse of atheism.

Framing and Visual Rhetoric in the Atheistic Blogosphere

Blogs are a digital form of cultural expression that plays a role in the construction and maintenance of individual and group identities. Blogging unites the audience, turning “they” and “us” into a “we” media in which the audience can participate to build the content.¹⁹⁵ Using the minority concept that God does not exist, the New Atheist movement uses the blogosphere to share their cultural, political, and ideological vision. The medium of the blog attracts this minority group and individuals who share their interest in atheism and participate in the blogosphere. The struggle of the New Atheism in the blogosphere through visual production constructs a frame for sharing perspectives and a visual regime.

First, the New Atheism movement in particular engages the audience at the symbolic level through visual content. As noted in Chapter One, the visuality of the New Atheist’s message attracts audiences and competes in the public media market. New Atheist’s imageries are polysemic and dynamic, appearing at the intersection of desire to promote atheism, challenge the paradigm of incumbent power, and endorse humanity, science, and technology as alternatives to “God/gods.”

The rhetor has the power to design the audience's visual experience, manifesting his or her interpretation of the relationship between atheist and theist, or atheist and society. The rhetor encodes the phenomenon, criticism, and opinion of prominent figures in the New Atheist movement and then decodes the interpretations in the frame of rejection (burlesque) or acceptance (carnavalesque). Choosing one of these strategies allows the rhetor to target individuals or groups, which may elicit hatred from the target, or question the social construction, which may encourage evaluation of dominant values. At this level, the rhetor wants to share the constructional frame with the audience so that the audience can see the world or target from the same window. This strategy may create a visual regime, but one in which the audience can see the phenomenon from a different perspective. For example, when the theist wants the audience always to see the morality and holiness of religious teaching and figures, the new "window" or "visual regime" will show that religious people are full of immorality and hypocrisy. The visual regime somehow dictates a partial interpretation about religion and religious people, but it also allows participation through the openness of the blogosphere.

Second, blogs are participatory media in which individuals or groups may take part in the discussion and spread information.¹⁹⁶ The nature of the blog is likely to attract a homogeneous and interconnected audience, one with a pre-existing interest in the subject matter.¹⁹⁷ This niche audience usually involves an opinion leader and early adopters.¹⁹⁸ When the rhetor wants to share an interpretation of human relationships through an image, the audience gives consent in various ways. The audience can participate by searching the blogs; they can also choose to be exposed to the blog's content; and they have the freedom to comment on the blog and share it with their community. New Atheism fights the dominant culture through participatory media, attractive visual imagery, and an alternative point of view. It tells us that a significant space

exists for individuals to be critical and discuss atheism. The analysis on the commentaries from the audience shows the space of interaction in blogosphere. Intriguing images of New Atheism also trigger the discussion and confirm the interpretation of the image. One limitation of my study is that the number of comments and reblog posts on the atheist websites and blogs is considerably smaller than most popular/mainstream websites such as religious fan websites or other media fan websites. Therefore, due to the limitation of the non-mainstream cultural production with niche audience and limited number of audience appeal/data, some comments echoed my assessments of the images, but there were not enough comments to determine whether or not the blog commentary was representative of audience response.

Another limitation of the study is the challenge of adopting the linguistic theoretical framework from Kenneth Burke to the visual rhetoric. I found that the polysemic power of visual rhetoric may have broad perspective in interpreting the images as both burlesque and carnivalesque. Burke's formulation is unable to adequately capture the nuance of the visual rhetoric because many examples displayed characteristics that could be read as simultaneously burlesque and carnivalesque.

Further research could explore other rhetorical strategies the new atheist movement has used. Also worth examining are other tenets from Burke's frame of acceptance and rejection such as grotesque, satire, and tragedy. Another possibility is to look at the interaction of visual imagery and audience dialogue within the new atheist movement, such as visual elements as significant communication tools in the interaction between atheists to theists, atheists and themselves, or atheists and society in general.¹⁹⁹

Furthermore, a minority group's visual rhetoric is a discursive form of deliberation, empowerment, and criticism through the playful power of symbol. Symbols and representations

create large spaces for understanding relationships, perspectives, and criticism, and it is worth exploring the nature of these spaces. Additionally, digital media has the potential to increase participation by minority groups in the public dialogue. While the atheist movement becomes more vocal and has more spaces through digital media, little has been done to limit freedom and encourage more respect toward each other. Not only do atheists need to respect religious people, but also religious people should respect the point of view of atheism, which has been silenced for centuries, and acknowledge their existence in society. The new atheists' visual rhetoric in the blogosphere reveals that the power of rhetoric combined with political interest, science, and technological appraisal can attract more people and shape the wider atheist community.

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