In the span of a few years there was a veritable flood of best-selling books propounding what has come to be termed the ‘new atheism.’ Taken together in sum, the new atheists tell us religion has been one of the principal causes of human suffering, that it has led to violence, and that it promotes extremism. In addition, the religious mindset thwarts the rationalistic approach to the world and human problem solving, allowing untestable and unsupported mythological stories to serve as explanations for natural phenomena. And even more, when actually examining what religious believers believe when they attest to their faith in God or in sacred scripture, they are riddled with contradictions that should either outrage the mind or offend moral sensibilities. Plain facts told in the most provocative style, the new atheists seized on the cultural angst felt by many of those who felt left out or beaten down by the cultural warriors on the Right and who worried that the two successive terms of President George W. Bush set the United States on a perilous path towards theocracy.

But when examining their central claims—not to mention the public discussion that surrounded their publications—one has to ask whether anyone is really surprised to learn that the historic faiths are guilty of self-contradictions, that religious fanatics are prone to violence, and that all religions have a human origin? There was a time when these observations were truly radical and provocative. But between then and now a gulf of religious scholarship and critique has transpired, heightening our awareness and forcing any religious devotee not only to learn the truths of his or her tradition, but also to rethink the nature of religious truth. Most (with the exception of fundamentalists) would now concede that religions are true not in the same way that science or mathematics are true, but more in line with the way a Picasso portrait conveys a subjective truth that belies the merely representational. For instance, except for the most literal-minded, the Bible is not proven untrue or unreliable because it has two contradictory stories of creation in the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis, or because it
has four different portraits of Christ included within the New Testament. On the contrary, an appreciation of these variances—even contradictions—is essential to understanding the particular nature of truth that belongs to the religious.

In this sense, the problem that the new atheists have with religion is not religion per se, but with religious literalism—or more technical still, in the words of the Christian philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich, the problem with most religious conceptions of God is that they are a form of “theological theism.” That is to say, the new atheists’ understandings of God only work as a singular piece of a metaphysical puzzle within a particular metaphysical system of thought or belief. When theological theism is the problem, Tillich went on to argue, atheism is the proper—indeed, Christian—response. That being said, atheism can also fall prey to the problem of theological theism whenever it is expressed as a categorical rejection of God and any sense of ontological understanding of the world. In other words, a rigid or dogmatic atheism replaces one flawed puzzle-board with another flawed puzzle-board with different pieces. Consequently, many Christian responses to new atheism are arguments for one theological theism versus another (see, for example, Varghese 2007, 180–183).

This chapter argues that the so-called new atheists are guilty of the same problems that Tillich predicted of future atheism, and suggests a radical theological critique of the new atheism. In other words, the argument will be that the new atheists do not go far enough in their critique of traditional Christianity. Put succinctly, the new atheism is insufficiently radical. To make this argument we will first draw on the radical theology of the American “death of God” movement, which paradoxically proposes an atheistic Christianity that is both atheistic and theistic. Second, we will examine how theology itself has been made radical by passing through the crucible of the death of God. By articulating this radical approach to religion, we hope to show that the idea of a Christian God is not one that is so easy to knock down or simply argue away with atheism, precisely because the concept of God in Christianity is dynamic, contradictory, imprecise, dependent on interpretation, and therefore highly resistant to logical or empirical dismissal. The surprising conclusion, therefore, is that while there will always be some benefit to exposing the contradictions of religious belief and the dangers inherent to religious practice—we might not realize that we are simultaneously establishing the conditions (intellectual and cultural) by which a non-theistic conception of God might