In this chapter, I examine the debates surrounding the rise and decline of the secularization thesis and discuss the ways that the emergence of the New Atheists provides evidence that both supports and contradicts the secularization thesis. Placing the New Atheists within the ongoing debate about secularization sheds light on this new ‘movement’ and will ultimately show that the New Atheists are not necessarily products of secularization but are, instead, purveyors of it. The typically belligerent, impassioned, and overly hostile tropes of the New Atheism’s Four Horsemen—Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens—show that religion has retained an extraordinary amount of power in the modern world. If we lived in a secular world, their writings would be trite and unnecessary. That is,
there would be no need for such writings or such a movement if most people were not religious in some way or another. There would be no need for their ferocious attacks on religion if there were no opposition. As their collective vigilance and vehemence shows, that opposition is strong, and because it is so strong, the New Atheists, armed with their sceptical faith in science, fight back even harder.

A History of the Secularization Thesis

Over the past one hundred and fifty years, the secularization thesis has, like religion itself, undergone a number of transformations in both form and content (see Swatos and Christiano 1999). For the purposes of this discussion, we can delineate three separate phases in which the secularization thesis has sequentially been supported, modified, and opposed. It should be noted that, like any history of ideas, this delineation is only one way of contextualizing theories about secularization. Indeed others have offered more detailed versions than the one offered here, delving deeply into the unsettled and often unsettling waters of the secularization thesis (see Dobbelaere 1981; Tschannen 1991; Chaves 1994; Goldstein 2009). The periodization presented here, however, offers the reader an introduction of sorts that will help contextualize the current influx of the New Atheist polemics.

After showing the career of the secularization thesis, we will be able to see how the New Atheists’ writings are, in many ways, a throwback to the First Phase of the theory’s development. This throwback creates an obstacle to understanding what is new about the New Atheism. Furthermore, we will see how the New Atheists have repackaged older ideas with new terminology and with an ardent devotion to their beliefs. Their collective and individual impassioned writings differ from any of the social scientists writing about religion and secularization with regard to their intentions and motivations. Instead of presenting their work as scholarship that seeks to understand the state and role of religion in contemporary society, their writings are treatises on the way the people should relate to, and ultimately dismiss, religion.

The First Phase: Secularization Theory and the Modern World

The first phase encompasses the original laying out of the foundations of secularization as a process by which the presence of traditional