The mid-to-late 2000s saw the rise of what some commentators have called the “new atheism,” a social movement of sorts spawned by a set of high-profile scientists and philosophers and driven by their best-selling books. Spearheaded by the so-called Four Horsemen of the New Atheism – Richard Dawkins (2006), Daniel Dennett (2006), Sam Harris (2004), and the late Christopher Hitchens (2007) – the movement asserted that it was time society stopped taking a hands-off approach to religious fundamentalism (Amarasingam 2010; McGrath and McGrath 2007). Instead, atheists must hold faith-based groups accountable for their poor treatment of women, for the promotion of violence, and their general lack of antipathy to science and empiricism (Stenger 2009, 25). The broader context in which this movement emerged was a variety of events and developments that many in the United States and around the world saw as dangerous and deeply troublesome – and primarily caused by religion. These developments include, among other things, the September 11th attacks on the twin towers in New York City by Al-Qaeda operatives, the ways in which the George W. Bush administration was allowing Christian religious conservatives to have influence over policy decisions regarding climate change and gay rights, and the peculiar re-emergence of creationism under the guise of intelligent design during the 2005 legal battle in Dover, Pennsylvania (Bullivant 2010; Lebo 2009; Wright 2007). These and other events formed the backdrop to the rise of the new atheism, and its argument that if religion was going to “go public” and demand influence in matters of domestic and foreign policy, it should be judged by the same evidentiary and scientific standards that are required of everyone else. In other words, we needed to throw off the kid gloves when dealing with religion.

The new atheists largely endorsed the view that religion promotes evil via division and tribalism, and often leads to warfare and sectarianism (Dennett 2006, 55; Hitchens 2007, 5; Harris 2008, 39). Indeed, the new atheists rebuked pressure to kowtow to the tacit political correctness and social norms that typically prohibit critique of religion and instead became vocally anti-theist. They openly argued that religious beliefs are irrational and believers operate
off of blind trust, refusing to consider any scientific evidence that may contradict their beliefs. Within a new atheist framework, religious belief can and should be replaced with faith in science. There is little that is altogether unique about this belief. Indeed, Richard Dawkins’ previous works as well as writers like Edward O. Wilson have put forth similar arguments before. Some scholars have labelled this school of thought “scientism,” which Mikael Stenmark (1997, 15) describes as the conviction that “there are no real limits to the competence of science, no limits to what can be achieved in the name of science. Or, if there are limits to the scientific enterprise, the idea is that science, at least, sets the boundaries for what we humans can ever achieve or know about reality. There is nothing outside the domain of science, nor is there any area of human life to which science cannot successfully be applied.” In other words, what makes the new atheism “new” is not necessarily its new ideas, but the urgency with which the movement feels that these older ideas need to be re-established.

The publication of books by Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens, and Dennett along with their numerous conferences, debates, and public appearances have kept the movement itself quite popular and influential, their aggressive form of argumentation, as well as the ways in which some of their views have become quite “illiberal,” has produced some blowback and criticism within the secular and atheist community. That is the focus of this paper. While it is difficult to quantify whether the popularity of the new atheism is on the rise or facing decline, our focus is to examine the reasons for this backlash in the present time. We argue that these internal debates in the atheist community, particularly arguments directed against new atheist writers, has a lot to do with the new atheists’ failure to understand not only the social and historical conditions that led to their popularity and influence in the first place, but also the demographical and cultural characteristics of those whom they have influenced.

In other words, many followers of the new atheism were responding to what they considered to be anti-secular, dogmatic, and discriminatory trends in contemporary society, and, as we will argue below, when new atheist writers began to evince similar traits and forms of argument, they faced equally vibrant internal critique. While a variety of large-scale societal trends could likely be examined here to explain the rise and eventual fracture of the new atheism, we focus particularly on the rise of the “millennials” as well as multiculturalism which, we argue, forms the cultural backdrop that precipitated the influence of the new atheism, but also explains much of the internal debate and criticism it is now receiving.