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NEW AGE ATHEISM MOVEMENT: A VANISHING MEDIATOR INTO A FUTURISTIC SECULAR SOCIETY

Niñoval F. Pacaol
Independent Researcher, Philippines
correspondence: ninoval.pacaol05@gmail.com
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Abstract
The progress of natural science together with some of the vicious crimes committed by religions were central to the New Age Movement of Atheism since the first decade of the century. Their atheistic evangelicalism is for the secularization of society and the dissolution of religions in every aspect of human life. This paper hinges on Kahambing's development of the concept 'vanishing mediator' and applies its synthesized framework as methodology. The application of the concept: a.) retroactively traces an intervention, b.) evaluates the intervention, c.) identifies the mediator, and d.) locates the vanishing point. Applying this to new age atheism, the discussion of the study is divided into three parts. First, it introduces the historical origin and atheistic interventions on religions. Second, the movement is treated as a vanishing mediator or transition from religious to secular society. Lastly, it gives a futuristic account of a secular world that is rooted on the influence of new atheism in the era.

Keyword: Atheism, science, religion, secularism, vanishing mediator

Introduction
The new age of atheism is often conceived as an attempt to obliterate the influence and power of religions. In countries where religion is a powerful and dominant force in every aspect of society, atheism is regarded as a taboo and acquires negative connotation. However, the concept of atheism is not a new invention of man out of nothing. Rather, it emerged from a long and gradual process of development. Many of its fundamental principles and ethos are rooted in history. The term New Atheism was coined to refer to the antireligious movement commenced by Richard Dawkins (2006), Daniel Dennett (2006), Christopher Hitchens (2007), and Sam Harris (2004) – collectively named as 'the four horsemen of the apocalypse' – yet its progress and success are *not* only exclusive to the four of them. It comprises an ongoing list of other known scientists, philosophers, and public speakers who entered into the public square to openly challenge religions.

Likewise, atheists are also classified as naturalists and irreligionists (Oppy, 2017). Naturalists are people who believed that everything that exists has its

natural causes and effects and nothing beyond it. On the other hand, irreligionists reject all kinds of religion and consider them to be social pathologies. Since the contemporary atheist movement is not an established ideology, a common defining feature is hardly presented. But a general point of agreement could be framed on behalf of the movement, which is that new atheism is an "attempt to carry out a more aggressive fight *against* religion's influence on political and social life, especially when religion comes into *conflict* with science" (Schulzke, 2013, p. 780; emphasis added).

The great awakening of new atheism movement highlights a revolutionary interest in religion and theism. Identical to several movements in the history of the word, the movement is not only working for a short-range achievement and pursuit. Any reader and social spectator should not treat and see this social and intellectual intrusion of atheists as mere cheap shots to the structures of religions within the present-age consequences. In basic terms, one should try to foresee its fate and providence while considering the occurrences and instances happening in the modern era for an evenhanded appraisal.

Moreover, many studies have been conducted to analyze this social and intellectual phenomenon within the frame of the present time, and only a few attempts to envisage the significant role of the movement in the future and whether its intent and purpose will be achieved. Consequently, this study endeavors to critically examine and account the new age of atheism not only as a radical move to dismantle the dominance of religion in the world but also a bridge or conduit for the possibility of a novel social order characterized by atheistic principles and ethics.

Method

The paper utilized Kahambing's (2019a) development of the 'vanishing mediator' as a theoretical framework and applied this is a methodological paradigm. In an earlier *prima facie* synthesis, the vanishing mediator is commonly the "mediating principle between two opposing terms, usually employed in historical phases where equally diverging ideas grapple at some point in an interaction catered by an intermediary" (Kahambing, 2018, p. 5). The mediator makes considerable changes in the former phase and vanishes, like a ghost[1], after its task is done. However, vanishing does not mean total annihilation since it is still a subsumed aspect of the new phase (Kahambing, 2019a; 2019b). Under the new phase and in locating the vanishing point, the mediator is now incorporated but not completely removed.

Following the aforesaid concept of a vanishing mediator, new atheism's movement was treated as an active or vigorous transition into the secularization of society. Also, for a logical and organized pattern, four processes of vanishing mediator were utilized as proposed by Kahambing, namely: a.) retroactively trace the intervention, b.) evaluate the intervention, c.) identify the mediator, and d.) locate the vanishing point. Within the framework and scope of the study, the paper will provide, initially, the historical background and origin of atheism to methodically locate the place of contemporary atheism in the history of thought as a dialectic between science and religion. Afterward, the researcher entered into a discussion of the intervention made by new atheists since the inception of the 21st century as an extension of its historical origin. Next, new atheism was treated as a

vanishing mediator. Lastly, the researcher gave a futuristic account of atheism as an effort to establish the probability of a secular world.

Findings and Discussion

The dialectic of atheism and the New Age Movement

Historically speaking, atheism – contrary to common perception – is not an antagonism or enmity that exists between science and religion (LeDrew, 2012), but rather is an emergence from an internal inconsistency within theism itself. This makes theology turn to science for scientific footing.[2] "In the seventeenth century, not only was science…not opposed to confessional Christianity; it often believed that it could and should do the foundational thinking for Christianity" (Buckley, 2004, p. 32). Hyman (2007) used the former's concept to emphasize that the notion of God in early modernity as "specifiable substance" in an "identifiable location" in the world departs from the pre-modern theological of God as an ontologically transcendent mystery. This shift in understanding God becomes the focus of scientific inquiry.

Meanwhile, the history of scientists intervening was encouraged by theologians to look for empirical evidence in their theological claims (LeDrew, 2012). In effect, men of science during the Scientific Revolution integrate their theological principles with their scientific theories (Henry, 2010). Newton's discoveries and the formulation of his theory of gravitation led to the likelihood of answering the questions that were previously under the domain of theology. Through science, he transformed the perspective of the mysterious universe into a system of lucid forces. Nonetheless, as scientific inquiry advanced during the 18th century, scientists discarded the idea of a static universe wherein its laws originate from God and considered the latter as unnecessary to explain the cosmos (Hampson, 1968). A significant transformation and alteration of roles have been done to explain the nature of reality from religion to science.

Such modification on the function of religion heralds the advent of atheism. For Buckley (2004), a negation was not engendered to theism itself as a result of scientific discoveries. That is, "atheism did not so much provide an *external* challenge to theism, but rather a revolution *within theology* itself is what gave rise to atheism. This is to claim that the origins of modern atheism are ultimately *theological*" (Hyman, 2007, p. 40; emphasis original). There are paradoxes and interreligious misunderstanding among religions and *within* a religion (Kahambing, 2014, 2015a, 2015b), which makes one question the freedom of believers (Kahambing, 2016).

It is important to take note that this historical event did not eventually lead to atheism but a form of "skepticism of revelation and a belief in 'natural religion' or *deism*" (LeDrew, 2012, p. 5; emphasis original). And the Enlightenment's dominant response was that "religion which could not be established by reason was no religion at all – it was superstition" (Thrower, 2000, p. 100).

Baron d'Holbach, considered to be the first professed atheist in the Western tradition, enumerated three distinct criticisms against religion: a.) religion's teachings are contrary to scientific truth; b.) religions support a corrupt social order; and c.) it is not a functional foundation of morality (Thrower, 2000). These could be classified as epistemological, political, and moral critiques which are

apparent descriptions reflective of Casanova (1994), namely: cognitive, practical-political, and subjective expressive-aesthetic-moral.

Scientific and humanistic atheism

LeDrew (2012) in his careful study on the historical development of contemporary atheism argued that there are two major historical episodes in atheistic thought, specifically: scientific and humanistic atheism. Believers of scientific atheism centered their argument of religion on science. It is a struggle between explanation and knowledge against ignorance. In this case, scientific education could displace and eliminate religion. The most remarkable factor and cause of this division of theism is the formulation of the Darwinian Theory of Evolution by Natural Selection precisely because it challenges the 'Argument from Design' of religion and the question on the existence of life. The theory sustained atheism with an answer to fill the void that exists for thousands of years. Equally, natural science is not only the main province of scientific atheism. It is also important to take note that even intellectuals from sociology and anthropology posited religion as the lower stage in humanity's evolution.

Conversely, humanistic atheism focuses and criticizes religion as a social phenomenon and as an indication of alienation and oppression or human suffering, in general terms. Berman (1988) called this atheistic move as an "anthropological approach" and people in this division of atheism offered gripping description of the causes and what sustains the belief that makes religion possible.

> This approach surfaced largely as a response to *discontent* with the promise of the Enlightenment that modernity would lead to greater prosperity for all, as well as a recognition that the rationalist cognitive critique of religion did nothing to address the non-rational sources of religious belief, which include alienation, suffering, infantile neurosis and insecurity, and fear of death. (LeDrew, 2012, p. 9; emphasis added).

The materialist philosopher Feuerbach (1957[1841]) declared that man creates an antithesis of himself as he place God above him via religion. The classical conception of God (primarily of Christianity) was the "best and highest attributes of humanity" (Hyman, 2007, p. 36). The sudden transference from theological claims to the human condition and the stress of religion as a false explanation about the nature of reality is, for LeDrew, the true essence of humanistic atheism. For Marx (2002[1845]), Nietzsche (2003[1895]), and Freud (1989[1927]) – contemporaries of the so-called 'hermeneutics of suspicion' – religion is an illusion that serves as an escape from the reality of suffering. For instance, moderate religions allow for the legitimization of implausible beliefs, like "the belief that by killing apostates you will be rewarded in heaven" (McAnulla, 2012).

Conclusively, LeDrew maintained that new atheism is primarily, though not entirely, an extension of these two flights yet giving more prominence to the former. That is, though the atheistic movement is best understood as an extension of scientific atheism, the latter [humanistic atheism] still plays a role.

Biblical and social critique on religion and its incompatibility with science

The historical origination of atheism and its divisions help and sustain the current atheism movement of the century. Similarly, two major reasoning and bases of the profound critique of "New Atheism" on religion could be established based on the aforesaid discussion, explicitly: *a.) religion as the cause of serious social problems*; and b.) *incompatibility of religion on the success of natural science* (Emilsen, 2012; Schulzke, 2013). D'Holbach's criticisms of religion during the period of Enlightenment seem to ricochet from this categorization. The first critique could be grounded on echoing the influence of humanistic atheism whereas the second is a reflection of scientific atheism. Before advancing into the next section, it is worth mentioning that atheists of the new age movement are an amalgam of former religious believers (e.g. Michael Shermer, and Dan Barker) and scholars raised within an atheist environment (e.g. Peter Singer, and Sam Harris). Here, it can be seen that the critical intervention of new atheism against religions is both from insider and outsider perspectives.

Meanwhile, as maintained by LeDrew (2012), new atheists are more likely a product of scientific atheism and apply the Victorian dialogue on the eternal conflict between religion and science in pressing forward the proposition that religion is the haunting character of *pre-modern* times. This is in contrast with the modern age, which is characterized by science that religion and magic are precluded (Segal, 2004). Scientific advancement, evidence, and rationality are integral in the atheism movement that tends to overthrow and show irrationality of religious faith. Atheists are very much critical and sensitive to the term *faith*; it is, according to them, a belief *without* evidence.

Science, and not religion, is the only way to truth. Science is often apprehended as the only discipline that can offer a satisfactory explanation of the world which tends to override other worldviews (Sieczkowski, 2018). Moreover, the alleged irrationality of religion is always at the core of the writings and speeches of new atheists. For them, the spread of religious doctrines contradict with the known laws of science. There is a tendency of religion not to help us to better understand the world around us but ironically project a pagan universe where everything can be justified (Kahambing, 2019c). Some even presume that the "*darkness* of religious ignorance and superstition would fade away when exposed to the *lights* of reason" (Casanova, 1994, p. 31; emphasis original). Hence, such an atheistic movement is keen to supplant superstitions with science and reason.

Krauss (2012) argued that theologians are experts at nothing and when it comes to understanding the universe, religion, and theology are always irrelevant. Christianity as a religion, for example, employs methods of interpretation that are controlled by its magisterium (Kahambing, 2019g) and its sacraments like Reconciliation have undergone crises (Kahambing, 2020c). He went even further by declaring that theology does not have any contribution to human knowledge for the last 500 years. In *Godless*, Barker (2012), a former evangelical Christian and now a leading atheist, equate every achievement we have to science whereas theology gives us hell. Perhaps the underlying rationale for this confident statement of Krauss and for other men of science could be inferred from the evidenced-based theory of evolution and modern discovery of physicists and

cosmologists about the mysteries of the universe, which for many atheist-scientists are proofs (at least in their so much inclination to science) of the non-existence of God or the impossibility of the concept's reality.

Additionally, most of the non-believers of Divine Providence are critical to the unwarranted acts and culture of God's followers. Within the history of religion and its mutineers, new atheism identifies two opposing traditions: religion is treated as universally harmful (e.g. promotion of genocidal suicide) and a counter-tradition of various skepticism was developed during the Enlightenment's outright attack on superstition and liberating phase of science (Johnstone, 2018). Atheists correlate religion as one of the prime sources of human suffering which opens the possibility of violence and promotes extremism (Robbins & Rodkey, 2010). Congruently, a shared approach of new atheists is to recount and make some direct quotation from the Bible or Koran and claim that any holy book should not be the judge as to the only source of morality. Instead, great literary writings, poetry, and philosophy could provide us better moral and ethical principles (McAnulla, 2012).

The most reasonable driving force why atheists of the era questioned the credibility of religions was the 9/11 attack on World Trade Center (McAnulla, 2012), a tragedy done by ISIS, a Muslim affiliated group, "who claimed to be acting in the name of Islam" (Khalil, 2017, p. 33). Such atrocity of the ISIS put the entire Islam and even Judeo-Christian religions on trial and turns the attention of the public domain into the purpose of the atheistic movement. Hitchens (2004) regard 9/11 as the hinge event in history; however, for Amis (2009) the incident was a day of de-Enlightenment, an attack on morality, a massive geohistorical jolt, which will resound for years.

The notorious reproach of new atheism is wholly disposed to challenge the structural system of religion, its power and influence from individual liberty to global issues. Dennett (2006) made some caveat that those who administer religions, especially those who aestheticize them, "must be held similarly responsible for the harms produced by some of those whom they attract and provide with a cloak of respectability. An adaptation of fundamentalist religion would "return to the Dark Ages" (Grayling, 2007, p. 39), an oratorical gambit used by atheists to warn the general public of such possibility.

The New Age Movement of Atheism as Vanishing Mediator

Religious identity and patterns have been systematically attacked by new atheism. Unlike the Reformation, the movement is not keen on rebuilding and re-evaluation of religious structure and practice to gain its moral status again. Rather the endeavor is the dissolution of religion, as a social institution in the society and replaced it with secular principles and ethics. Retrospectively, some of the success of new atheism creates the reality of increasing numbers of nonreligious, persisting decline support for organized religion, and "the future prospects for the broader atheist, secular and humanist community" (Kettell, 2013, p. 69). Irreligious attack on the irrationality of religious beliefs is mainly grounded and seen as an omen in putting forward the chance of secularism in society (Cimino & Smith, 2011).

From this framework, new atheism functions as a vanishing mediator between religious and a purely secular society. As was synthesized, a vanishing

mediator is a mediating catalyst between two concepts and vanishes or ceases when its task is complete (Kahambing, 2019a). Seeing secular society as a direct result of new atheism, the latter could be deduced as an *active interference* since it causes a great change and modification on the features of the mediating phase (religion). One of the propositions advanced in the development of the concept is that: "the vanishing mediator has an agency that is active, rather than passive, in permitting exchanges of exclusive terms" (p. 476).

The act of vanishing, however, does not mean total annihilation (Kahambing, 2019), since it is still a subsumed aspect of the new phase (secular society in this case). Under the new phase and in locating the vanishing point, the mediator is *not* completely removed. Meanwhile, Borer (2010) envisages the place of new atheism movement in a secular society:

> 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. (p. 126).

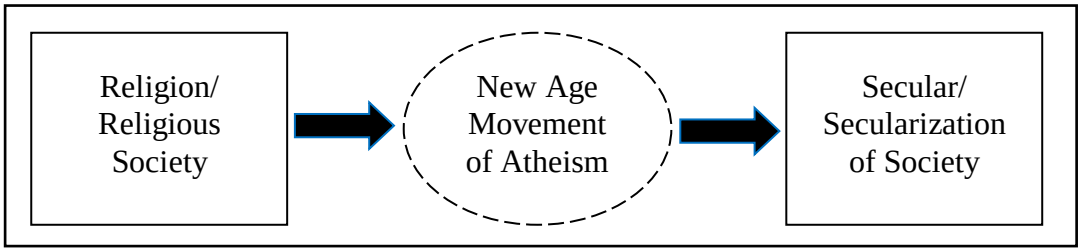


Figure 1. Basic Schema of New Atheism as Vanishing Mediator

Nevertheless, since secular society is not yet self-evident globally, one should not postulate instantly that the new age of atheism has already done its job and it vanishes from the picture. Hence, the researcher is *not* committed to asserting that we are living already in a secular world. The study, however, is to approach this futuristically. The movement (or the transitory phase) is *still* active and should and must continue its atheistic intervention against the prevailing influence of religions if it is really into an absolute secularization (See Figure 1). Patent insignia of the active intercession of atheism movement are the upsurge in the number of atheistic organizations in the Orient and Occident regions of the world.

This is then a start says Slavoj Žižek, an atheist-Christian philosopher, while dismissing and doubting the efficacy of the present crusade of atheists. In his film *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, Žižek (2012) states that the only way to be an atheist is to go through Christianity. He even radically declared that Christianity is much more atheist compared to the usual concept of atheism. Following this argument, there is no need to vehemently claim that there is no God. If this is the case, then secular ideals have already been present for centuries and only need some nudge from atheists to squarely advance such a proposition.

Hypothetically, even Christian believers begin to hold this revolutionary idea and yet the consistent involvement of atheists in the public domain is essential., The next juncture explores the futuristic possibility of the secular world and in

what instances do new atheism, as a vanishing mediator, would cease to exist and what are its traces under the new phase. Thus, the inexorable question still remains: Would religions really vanish?

The Future of Atheism and Religion in the Next Centuries

The prominence of public atheism has risen throughout the globe as a consequence of the publication of best-selling atheistic books and the increased usage of the internet as a venue to connect to other nontheistic individuals (Keysar & Navarro-Rivera, 2013). Its providence among scholars incites the question: would atheism have profound effects and influence on the religious landscape not only within America and Europe but throughout the world? Or would that be easily forgotten for the next succeeding years? In other words, would the world become a secular place in the next centuries or become even more religious?

The warranted answer to these questions cannot be given facilely due to the vast demographics of the human population. A great amount of time and different certified studies must be conducted for reliable bases.

> …any predictions regarding the mid-to long-term impact of the new atheism can only be of the most cautious sort. Even its immediate impact is very difficult to quantify just yet. Due to the complex and time-consuming nature of large-scale data collection, comprehensive statistical information may not appear for some time. (Bullivant, 2010, pp. 120-1).

But any profound effects are always linked to how strong the force of its cause. In the previous section, it was noted that new atheism is *still* an active mediator that we are not yet living in the irreligious world. It would be premature, at present, to give a *full* and *deterministic* account of the future of atheism and its effect on society. Rather the direction of the inquiry should center on the instances and degree of how the movement would vanish from the scene as an indication of moving towards a secular community. Borer (2010) noted that *if* everything around us is manifestly secular, it is *only* the time that we do not need any more atheism movement. Thus, the question is: what characterizes a secular world to trace the vanishing point of the movement.

In an atheistic and secular community, religion disappears from its familiar forms and is replaced with a socially constructed worldview founded on a *non-supernaturalistic* and *non-transcendental foundations* (Borer, 2010). Such a worldview heralds the plausible downturn of religious power. According to McAnulla (2012), there are four dimensions of power that could be used to examine the approach of atheism on religion. First, religions experience an indefensible place within the public square. Despite the separation of church and state, religions could still influence some government *decision-making*, particularly on controversial issues. Second, in terms of *political agenda*, religion receive (though not in all cases and countries) some aids. A particular example is the allegation of new atheists on the extension of faith schools of the Church of England (McAnulla, 2012). Third, most religions practice *indoctrination or preference-shaping* like the idea of 'life afterlife.' Dawkins (2006) and Hitchens (2007) state that indoctrination is a form of child abuse that could affect later in

life. Lastly, religions *regulate* some behavior that is injurious to their subjects or believers: women are mostly assigned to a second-class status which disempowers the female gender.

The disappearance and abolition of religious powers would certainly indicate the triumph and feat of atheists while their public struggles and campaign would start becoming unnecessary and be gone from the new phase of social order. A careful consideration based on statistical data is crucial to map out the demographic increase of atheists.

Based on the 2008 International Social Survey Program (ISSP), there was a large increase of affiliated atheists for most of the forty participating countries during the study. The 2008 survey underlines the religious landscapes in several countries in the aftermath of the terrorist attack in the United States on September 11, 2001. The incident was condemned as a result of religious fundamentalism that marked and triggered the development of 'evangelical atheism.' Heretofore, Zuckerman (2007) estimated the demographic population of atheists between 500 and 700 million. He admitted that it is difficult to predict the future growth or decline of atheism. But while most people continue to have faith in deities in some societies, likewise, the non-belief in God is increasing (Bruce, 2002 as cited in Zuckerman, 2007). In general terms, 'nonreligious affiliation' (including atheists, agnostics, nones) is much higher which reflects the meteoritic growth of secularism from 3.2 million in 1900 to 918 million in 2000 (Paul & Zuckerman, 2007).

The increase of atheists over the years is notably significant in predicting the future of secularism and the condition as to how the new age movement of atheism would vanish. Unexpectedly, China constitutes a vast number of atheists worldwide notwithstanding that it is the heart of Buddhism despite within the Orient region which is commonly known for traditional and cultural practices. In the case of the United States, church membership and bible fundamentalists plunged from 70 to 65 percent and from 40 percent to 30 percent, respectively. Contrariwise, bible skeptics rose from 10 to 20 percent (Stenger, 2009). Such growth is seemingly caused by aggressively atheistic books.

At the same time, the current pattern on decreasing religiosity in Europe will continue until 2050, unfortunately, it may not happen indeterminately (Kaufmann, 2007). Scholars predict that Islam would match up the number of Christianity before the end of the century. The advancement of science is likely to happen but the dominance of religions will prevail. The presumed rise of Muslim believers is not because people will convert and change their religious affiliation rather it is the population (Paul & Zuckerman, 2007; Kaufmann, 2007; Stenger, 2009; Ellis, Hoskin, Dutton, & Nyborg, 2017) that causes exponential growth probably due to its polygamous relationships and highest reproduction rates. Nevertheless, anyone should not be misled by this projection: it is only the *share* of unaffiliated individuals in the global population that will decrease but their population is expected to surge by more than 100 million.

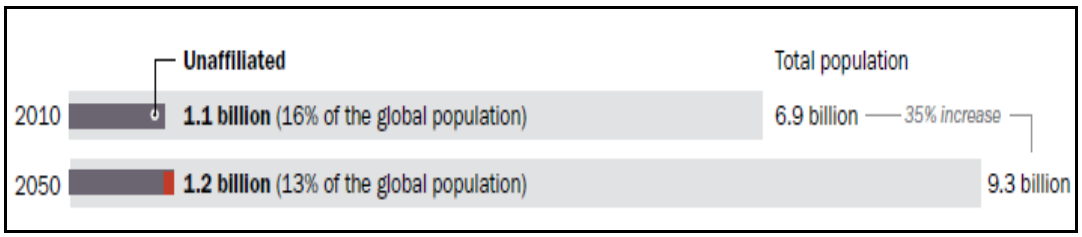


Figure 2. Projected Change in the Unaffiliated Population, 2010-2050 (Pew Research Center, 2015)

The probable collapse of the power of religions and the growth of atheists are distinctly the major factors in determining the vanishing degree of atheism movement in the future. An inclination to scientific explanations, the acceptance of homosexual rights and promotion of most controversial issues of society such as abortion, divorce, and use of contraceptives would be some of the traces of new atheism movement in the new phase (or the total dissolution of religion) as defended and advocated by atheists intellectuals. Apart from the futuristic account towards a secular society, another critical question is whether religions would disappear (absolutely). The researcher is not committed in declaring that new atheism's principles and ethics would dominate the world for the next century. If it is irrational and outdated to believe in religion, then what is the *survival value* of this irrationality? Also, the truth of theism (or the belief that there is a God) *cannot* be assessed by its sociocultural impact like terrorism and child abuse, which have been systematically questioned by atheists. Both theists and atheists are appraised to grow statistically but differ only in proportion. Henceforth, the complexity of predicting the future requires a lot of time and comprehensive study on various aspects of human life.

Conclusion

This study took a futuristic account by treating the advent of new-age atheism as a vanishing mediator towards a secular world. Throughout the paper, the new age of atheism was regarded as an active transitory phase that critically decry the religion as the cause of social suffering and positively advance science as the only way to the truth which originated during the 19th century. New Atheism was presumed to cease to exist the moment religious power falls and atheists' population consistently increases until the next centuries despite believers of major religions are also increasing. Nevertheless, religions are not ascertained by the researcher to fully vanish as atheism becomes a strong social force or power. This account engenders resistance but also the probability that the new structure can dominantly, if not completely, accommodate its tenets in a future society.

Notes

1. Kahambing (2019a) mentioned in the development of the framework that one of the recent adaptation of the vanishing mediator in literature is Gottlieb's (2017) exposition of the white lady in Walter Scott's *The Monastery* who, in her mediation, made some changes in the structure and then vanished. Like a mirage, a ghost, or a spectre, the vanishing mediator connects, by extension, to spectrality studies or the modes of the spectral in literature. See, for example, Kahambing (2019d; 2019e; 2020a; 2020b).

2. This scientific footing relied on positivism, among others, and this has affected philosophy (regarded as *ancilla theologia* or 'handmaid of theology' in pre-modernity) as well. See Kahambing, 2019f.

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