Introduction

In the introduction to the *The Second Plane*, which he wrote after 9/11, Martin Amis asks:

> What has extremism ever done for *anyone*? Where are its gifts to humanity? Where are its works?[1]

This is a brief but powerful indictment of extreme religion. But Amis, and others who have recently been labelled as the 'new atheists' or 'militant atheists', appear to pursue an extremism of their own. The language is belligerent; for example, in the same introduction he says: 'The more general enemy, of course, is extremism.' It is perhaps only a literary flourish to describe an ideology such as religious extremism as an *enemy*, but it is put forward in a context where religious extremists are bombed, imprisoned and tortured. Amis prefaces these remarks with the more chilling: 'It is a mind with which we share no discourse.' The mind he identifies is the mind of the religious extremist, and for some individuals on the extreme of religion there may be no discourse because they are beyond reason. But to identify a 'mind' with which there cannot be any discourse is in itself an extremism, because all 'minds' – understood as a cultural grouping – can enter into a conversation, if there is sufficient good will. The concept of 'postsecularism' pursued in this book is such a conversation. It does not accept that reason must rule out religion.

This book begins with the observation that the 'mutual ignorance pact' between secular culture and faith tradition has broken down – particularly after 9/11 – and asks the question: can the term 'postsecularism' be given to the resulting phenomenon of a renewed openness to questions of the spirit? To what extent was such a renewed openness gathering momentum prior to 9/11? Furthermore: what might be the nature of an emerging postsecular sensibility that distinguishes itself from old religion, secularism, and

the New Age, as a fourth way? Can postsecularism frame questions of the spirit in the mood of critical enquiry? And finally: in what way does postsecularism represent a hidden challenge to both religious extremism and the extremism of some atheistic response to religion?

It is not right, however, to suggest a moral symmetry between religious extremism and extreme atheism, as the latter has in itself no history of violence. It is also the case that where religious extremism has been confronted with major violence – by the American-led forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, for example – the intellectual background for it is hardly atheism. The argument here is quite different: it is to say that the laudable goal of eradicating religious extremism is unlikely to be achieved by force, particularly as most religious extremism has its roots in thwarted political aspirations rather than religious dogma. The visible intellectual challenge to extreme religion of extreme atheism is less likely to be successful than a quieter route, a hidden challenge perhaps, one that might come from the sensibility explored here as postsecularism.

How the book leads on from *Secularism*

This book is intended as the companion volume to *Secularism: The Hidden Origins of Disbelief*, which will be referred to throughout simply as *Secularism*. Although the concept of postsecularism developed here stands alone, it does draw on some key concepts from *Secularism*, in particular the 'Two-Fold Model of Spiritual Difference' and the analysis of the origins of the secular mind that flows from this model. These ideas are briefly recapitulated in this volume, so it is not essential to read *Secularism* first. Here it is useful just to mention some terminology from *Secularism* that may be unfamiliar. Firstly, 'God' is placed in quotation marks throughout to flag up that this is perhaps the most contested term in language generally, and in particular in the debates discussed here. Secondly, the term 'old religion' is used to denote religions which have their origins prior to the modern period: it helps to begin a disaggregation of the term 'religion' which is used by atheists to mean mostly Christianity, or perhaps all three monotheisms. 'Religionist' will be used here to denote someone who pursues the spiritual life, though not necessarily through old religion.

The work undertaken in *Secularism* was partly to achieve a much more thorough disaggregation of the term 'religion', based on the observation that monotheism had denied or elided the spiritual difference that was a feature of earlier and other pluralistic cultures,

and that the secular world has inherited this monolithic understanding of religion. At the end of the book it was shown that the secular mind arose partly out of the failure of a different kind of religion to emerge from the Enlightenment period: it was hinted that postsecularism might be a term for such a religious sensibility, and that it might now have conditions more favourable for its development.

Book structure

This book is divided into three parts. Part One provides the background to the following discussions, providing some definitions of terms, a delineation of the fields of study, and a recapitulation of the origins of secularism. Part Two explores how the new debate between atheists and religionists shapes up and to what extent it has a postsecular quality. Part Three then turns to a variety of cultural contexts within which we can observe a renewed openness to questions of the spirit.