

# **An Introduction to Atheism, Secularity, and Science**

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**Published PDF deposited in Coventry University's Repository**

**Original citation:**

Coleman III, TJ, Hood, RW & Shook, JR 2015, 'An Introduction to Atheism, Secularity, and Science' *Science, Religion & Culture* , vol 2, no. 3.

DOI 10.17582/journal.src/2015/2.3.1.14

ISSN 2055-222X

Publisher: Smith and Franklin Academic Publishing

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## Article



## Special Issue: Atheism, Secularity, and Science

## An Introduction to Atheism, Secularity, and Science

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**Abstract** | Over the past 10 years research and scholarship on secularity in general, and atheism in particular, has increased significantly. Moreover, these phenomena have been researched, studied and documented by multiple disciplines ranging from cognitive science to religious studies, and from anthropology to sociology. The study of atheism and secularity is of high interest to not only scholars, but also the public in general. In this special issue of *Science, Religion & Culture*, Guest Edited by John R. Shook, Ralph W. Hood Jr., and Thomas J. Coleman III, we present 8 articles, 2 research notes, and 3 book reviews on the topics of atheism, secularity, and science. Each article is introduced with brief commentary drawing attention to some of the key theoretical and methodological issues surrounding them as well as their implications for the study of atheism and secularity.

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**Citation** | Coleman III, T. J., R. W. Hood Jr. and J. R. Shook (2015). An introduction to atheism, secularity, and science. *Science, Religion and Culture*, 2(3): 1-14.  
**DOI** | <http://dx.doi.org/10.17582/journal.src/2015/2.3.1.14>  
**Guest Editors** | John R. Shook PhD, Ralph W. Hood Jr. PhD, and Thomas J. Coleman III

## An Introduction to Atheism, Secularity, and Science

Research on atheism and secularity has become an attractive topic over the past decade. Searching scholarly databases for scientific studies on these topics would have yielded little more than disappointment at the turn of the millennium. However, conducting such a search today would reveal that a copious portion of ink has been split on secularity in general, and nonbelief specifically. Indeed, the sciences no longer pass over what has become a sizable portion of the world's population (Zuckerman and Shook, Forthcoming).

Where it was once typical to begin a research article, introduction to a book volume, or special journal issue such as this one, by the researcher lamenting their particular field of study for neglecting such topics, this kind of pleading is no longer tenable (Bullivant and

Lee, 2012). Nonetheless, as researchers we cannot afford to rest on our laurels for very long. While studies on atheism and secularity now exist across disciplines ranging from psychology, cognitive science, sociology, religious studies, philosophy, anthropology, and many others, this provides only a theoretical and methodological starting point from which to explore the given topic. Importantly, within each of these disciplines lay multiple competing frameworks, field-specific conceptualizations, and inter-disciplinary scuffles as to precisely *what* secularity is, and *how* to study it. Typically, pre-existing frameworks developed for use in religious believing populations are modified to fit nonbelievers, as nonbelief is often presumed to be the dark shadow of whatever belief or religiosity is (Coleman and Arrowood, 2015; Silver, Coleman, Hood, and Holcombe, 2014). How far this approach will go toward answering whatever questions the scholar is interested in is an open one.

This special issue of the journal *Science, Religion & Culture*

*Culture* (SRC) aimed to cast a wide net around atheism, secularity, and science in effort to showcase a plurality of approaches. While various authors define secularity and atheism in different ways. There is a cluster or family resemblance among the authors. Here we simply note that secularity is in some sense a denial of certain religious beliefs and practices while atheism is also in some sense a denial of specific theistic claims. However, the issue is somewhat clouded in that there is a sense in which every one is an atheist insofar as they deny a particular view of theism. Furthermore, under the umbrella of secularity are those who are simply nonbelievers, not even engaged enough with religious beliefs to deny them (Shook, 2012). One seldom hears of astronomers spending much thought on denying astrological claims, nor do modern chemists seek to refute alchemical claims. Thus, we made no effort to impose any pre-determined definitions of such terms as secularity, atheism, or nonbelief in our call for papers for this special issue, though two papers deal at length with the question of definition.

In this special issue, we feature 8 articles, 2 research notes, and 3 book reviews from some of the top scholars in fields spanning psychology, sociology, and religious studies, as well as early career scholars who have now left their first mark. Each section in this introduction contains a brief prologue by the editors, introducing the subsections with 1-2 papers on a diverse number of topics including, scientific theory, discourse, psychometrics, health and wellbeing, organized secular groups, secularity in academia, hypothetical god image in nonbelievers, and deconversion, followed by the book reviews and a big thank you to the many reviewers who devoted their time to reviewing the submissions.

### In The Beginning: What is “nonreligion”?

Right now, somewhere in the world a person is lighting a candle in a dark room. Why are they doing so? What is the nature of this occurrence? While this could certainly be the beginning of a ceremony to channel the ancestor spirits, it could just as easily be, what one does when the electricity goes out (Herrmann, Legare, Harris, and Whitehouse, 2013). Without knowing any more, is this scenario religious or nonreligious? However, for the purposes herein, we have little need to answer this question. The point is that it could easily be both. But nonetheless, to make such a distinction, between that of a religious or non-religious act, we would certainly have to have much more context – whatever that might entail. In the end,

the only way to know might be to ask the person, and even that has its limitations.

As painfully ambiguous as the above example is, in that we may feel compelled to definitively know whether, how, or under what contexts, candle lighting can be religious or nonreligious, this same definitional ambiguity persists in the study of “nonreligion” and “nonbelief” from both cognitive and religious studies perspectives. In the cognitive science of religion (CSR), where the research programme is to uncover the universal cognitive processes that facilitate the acquisition of religious belief, these processes, much like the candle, remain “in the dark”. That is until one has further contextual clues with which to characterize the specific situation. Put another way, (and to pace “implicit theism,” c.f., Uhlmann, Poehlman, and Bargh, 2008) since the same processes that support belief also support nonbelief (Banerjee and Bloom, 2013; Coleman and Hood, 2015; Geertz, 2013; Geertz and Markusson, 2010; Gervais, Willard, Norenzayan, and Henrich, 2011; McCauley, 2011; Taves, 2013, 2015), attempts to characterize some cognition or behavior as primarily “religious” or “nonreligious” are doomed to fail in the long term. In this special issue of *Science, Religion & Culture*, we present two alternative, yet complementary, articles that call into question the usefulness and necessity of defining atheism and nonreligion.

### On (not) defining (non)religion

In his article “On (not) defining (non)religion,” Jong draws on problematic definitional attempts in philosophy, the social sciences, and even the natural sciences to suggest that definitions for “nonreligion,” like “religion,” are of, he suggests, “no legitimate scientific use” (15). However, he offers one possible strategy for progress in moving forward with research. By using the rapid advances made by CSR over the past two decades as a model (e.g., Atran and Norenzayan, 2004; Bering, 2006; Boyer and Lienard, 2006), Jong (22) suggests that definitions of religion and nonreligion:

...must come not at the beginning of a nascent research programme, but at the end. Or, better yet, critical questions about how we use our terms should be asked over and over again, in light of new theories and evidence.

Given what we have said above, similar concerns apply to such terms as “nonbelief” and “secularity.”

### Discourse Analysis and the Definition of Atheism

In continuing the critique of necessary and suffi-

cient definitions for phenomena, Quillen's article "Discourse Analysis and the Definition of Atheism" makes an important contribution by tracking discursive shifts that saw the historical "ἄθεος" become today's "atheism." In this brief genealogical endeavor, he draws attention to how the term has been attached to various contexts and purposes ranging from theological hegemony, rational-naturalism, and the scholarly pursuits of the social sciences. In the end, rather than looking to the Ivory Tower of academia to de-fuzz atheism as a category, perhaps we should value such definitional ambiguity and look to the very people who use the term atheism for its significance, or lack thereof. That is, we should take an *emic* approach to defining atheism and its cognates. As Quillen (32) suggests:

... 'Atheism' might be equally seen as an empty signifier, so that rather than busying ourselves with definitions, and thus contributing to a discourse mired in ambiguity, our attentions can be turned toward how individuals who identify as 'Atheists' go about filling that signifier with what they perceive the word to mean for their own usage.

In sum, both Jong's and Quillen's scholarship directs us to reconsider both *precisely* and *broadly* what non-religion, nonbelief, atheism, nontheism, and so on and so forth - *are*, or *are not*. Much like the ambiguity of lighting a candle in the dark (under what conditions might this be a religious act?), we will likely not have *one* enduring answer to any definitional quest, but only a collection of contexts in which a particular answer happens to provide meaning such that in *this* instance, lighting a candle is not a religious act.

### Measuring Nonbelief (And Belief!)

While definitions of nonreligious are one thing, survey measurement of the nonreligious is quite another. For example, let's say you have just been invited to complete a survey targeted at a nonreligious/nonbelieving demographic, of which you consider yourself to be a part. Happy to respond to this survey in order to share a little bit about yourself, you read the information and consent form on the first page and agree to participate. After completing various demographic questions, you happen upon a section inviting you to answer some questions about your (lack of) religious or spiritual beliefs. The first question reads: "I believe in a God who watches over me" and you are asked to pro-

vide an answer to this ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree<sup>1</sup>. How could you possibly answer this question without assenting to some level of precisely what it is you don't have – belief in God? You couldn't.

### The NonReligious-NonSpiritual Scale (NRNSS): Measuring Everyone from Atheists to Zionists

While nonbelief may no longer be a neglected topic in social scientific research in general (Bullivant and Lee, 2012), neglect persists in several key areas. With the exception of a single example, scale measures that approach the atheist with the same level of beneficence shown the theist currently fail to exist. Therefore, we are pleased to introduce the publication of Cragun, Hammer, and Nielsen's "The NonReligious-NonSpiritual Scale (NRNSS): Measuring Everyone from Atheists to Zionists." Cragun, Hammer, and Nielsen (49) suggest:

...the present evidence suggests that the NRNSS is a psychometrically-sound measure of how religious (vs. nonreligious) and spiritual (vs. nonspiritual) individuals consider themselves to be, which can be validly administered to individuals regardless of whether they self-identify as religious, spiritual, or neither.

In their effort to take measuring individuals identifying as "nonreligious" and "non spiritual" seriously, by providing a way to quantify religious identification and nonreligious identification without pointing "one-and-a-half barreled" (Hill and Hood, 1999) questions at the nonreligious, Cragun and his colleagues usher in what we hope will be the first of many comparative measures that do not exclude one of the fastest growing demographics on the planet: the nones.

### Daring Disbelief? Gambling With Your Health...

Belief is good for you! A long history of extensive research on the relationship between religion and health is certainly evidence of this (c.f., Koenig, 2011). However, belief in *what* is good for you? That is the question.

Surprisingly, or perhaps not, much of the research conducted in support of the "religion is good for you" hypothesis has never tested sources of meaning, values, and beliefs that do not contain religious content (Galen and Kloet, 2011). For example, research testing secular sources of virtues such as altruism and humility, or positive emotions such as joy and happiness

remain missing for comparison with religious sources (Koenig, 2011). This lacuna in research often goes ignored amidst the barrage of cross-sectional studies associating higher levels of religiosity with higher levels of well-being. Furthermore, and quite problematically, *lower* levels of belief in God are often taken to indicate that people with *no* belief must be suffering from poor mental and physical health. In the rush to demonstrate that some aspects of religion may be beneficial for some religious people, nonreligious sources that nonbelievers might draw upon in reaping equivalent or even greater benefit from remain untested.

In an article previously published in *Science, Religion & Culture*, titled “The Wager Renewed: Believing in God is Good for you,” McBrayer (2014) breathes new life into Pascal’s famous wager. In sum, Pascal’s original wager proclaimed that it was better—that is, more pragmatic—to believe in God than not to believe. This is because, if God did exist, one’s belief (and concomitant good, if mildly abstinent behavior) would lead to eternal joy in Heaven at relatively little hedonic cost; if one did *not* believe, however, one might allow oneself to indulge in worldly pleasures, but at the cost of one’s soul, which would be tormented eternally; thus, in this scenario, believers “win” massively. If, on the other hand, God did not exist, there would neither be beatification for the faithful nor damnation for the heathen; here, the heathen “win,” for experiencing more pleasure in this life, but this win pales in comparison with the believers’ in the previous case. According to Pascal’s cost-benefit analysis, it is more prudent to bet on God. Presumably, however, Pascal’s God is all-knowing, and being so, would be able to discern those who truly believed from those who were only gambling, and proceed to damn the latter for their insincerity. Where Pascal may have failed, McBrayer (2014, 130) aimed to mount a pragmatic case for religious belief, based on worldly benefits rather than heavenly ones. He draws on the literature supporting a link between religion and health, and concludes that “most people have a strong reason to believe in God regardless of the evidence” due to the suggested benefits of believing. But does he succeed?

### Atheism, Wellbeing, and the Wager: Why Not Believing in God (With Others) is Good for You

McBrayer may have renewed the wager, but in this issue, Galen ups the ante in his article “Atheism, Wellbeing, and the Wager: Why Not Believing in God (With Others) is Good for You”. Here, Galen brings a critical analysis of McBrayer’s thesis, by drawing

on additional research testing religious pro-sociality and the relationship between religion, health, and well-being (Galen, 2012, 2014, in press). It may not be so much *what* you believe in, but *how* you believe it and with *whom*, that is good for your health. As Galen suggests (63):

...the evidence indicates that it is beneficial to have a coherent worldview and to engage in regular meaningful interactions with others who share this view in a supportive environment that allows for prosocial engagement with the broader community. There is no reason to suggest that any religious, spiritual, or supernatural concepts need be invoked in order to facilitate this.

To return to the initial question, belief in *what* is good for you? Galen seems to have settled this question for now. In the end, it may not matter. Making a deal with the Devil, God, or even a piece of string cheese, can be good for you, provided that you really believe and believe it with others.

### From the U.S. to the U.K. - Secular Group Demographics

One clear testament to the increase of the nonreligious and nonbelievers around the world, specifically in the United States, has been the heightened visibility of Freethought groups. While most are familiar with at least one or two national groups, such as the Secular Student Alliance, Center for Inquiry, or American Atheists, not everyone is aware that countless other smaller groups exist throughout the nation at a local level. For example, in Chattanooga Tennessee, where co-editors Coleman and Hood reside, there are not only one, but two groups: the Chattanooga Freethought Association<sup>2</sup> and the Chattanooga Humanist Assembly<sup>3</sup>. Here, the groups consist of not only local individuals, but also many people from other states. Some are members of both of these groups, while others may favor only one. Furthermore, there are individuals who may self-identify as freethinking or humanist, but belong to neither. Despite past assumptions that nonbelievers may constitute a unified group with shared goals and interests, like any other human being, religious or not, there are intra- and intergroup differences too (Baker and Robbins, 2012; Blankholm, 2014; Cotter, 2015; Fazzino, Borer, and Abdel Haq, 2015; LeDrew, 2015; Silver et al., 2014; Smith, 2013). Nevertheless, numerous secular groups can be

found in all 50 states, but why do some join while others do not? How do these members approach the topic of religion in their day-to-day life?

### Atheism Looking In: On the Goals and Strategies of Organized Nonbelief

In their exploratory study secular groups titled “Atheism Looking In: On the Goals and Strategies of Organized Nonbelief,” Langston, Hammer, and Cragun provide an in-depth look at the backbone of secular groups in the United States: their members. Drawing from a sample of 1,939 religious nonbelievers, they categorized individuals based on their level of group involvement (including its absence), explored the perceptions by secular group affiliates of those who remain nonaffiliated, probed for the best ways to approach religion and religious individuals, and asked their respondents several other important questions on related topics. In the end, there are many ways to “not believe,” and joining a group may only be one of them. As Langston, Hammer, and Cragun (83) suggest regarding both the boon and the bane of attempts by secular groups to grow their numbers:

Mobilizing nonbelievers for whom nonbelief is not salient will likely prove difficult, but it may also be the case that such nonbelievers represent the ultimate aim of the nonbelief movement – living one’s life comfortably without religious belief.

Secular/nonbelief identity is multidimensional, multifaceted, nuanced, and diverse – no more or less so than a religious identity. Langston and colleagues’ study sheds light on the complex relationship between the individual atheist, the local Freethought group, national level groups, and society as a whole.

### A Profile of the Members of the British Humanist Association

Founded in 1896, the British Humanist Association (BHA) has been advocating on behalf of the nonreligious for well over 100 years. Inquiry into the BHA demographics formed then PhD student Colin Campbell’s dissertation in 1967 and served as a snapshot of who Britain’s nonreligious were during that era. Between 1972 and 2006 his research had been cited only five times – testimony to the status of research into the nonreligious during that time. However, more recently there has been a revival, a nonreligious one of course. From 2006 and to 2011, Campbell’s work had received at least 86 citations (2014). Despite early neglect, Campbell’s (1971) monograph present-

ing his survey work of the BHA has now been credited as a significant and substantive contribution to sociological approaches to nonreligion (Bullivant and Lee, 2012). Unfortunately to date, and at this time of renewed interest in nonreligion, there has been no extensive follow up of BHA demographics published. Even with the renewed interest since 2006, Campbell’s work has been at risk of further neglect; it has never been followed up – until now.

In his research note, “A Profile of the Members of the British Humanist Association,” Longden builds on Campbell’s original research and provides a cross section of the BHA membership as of 2014. Tending to important demographic markers, such as sex, age, residence, employment, and level of education, Longden compares his current data (N = 1,097) with Campbell’s original 1967 data (N = 927). The important question, have BHA demographics changed in its predominance of the younger, well educated male, urbane membership of mid 20<sup>th</sup> century? As Longden (94) suggests:

The 2014 survey has provided an insight into the membership of the BHA in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the main conclusion is that, with the exception of age, the 21<sup>st</sup> century humanist is very much like their 20<sup>th</sup> century counterpart.

While the varying demographics of freethought groups can provide valuable insight into organized religious nonbelief, one should be careful not to take these as characterizations of religious nonbelief in total, as Longden suggests. Nonetheless, where Campbell’s ground breaking research on the BHA set humanism as a central focus in the study of nonreligion, Longden continues to break ground by providing an informative longitudinal perspective that maintains this focus.

### Secularization Resurrected? A Projection of Growth

Despite claims that there is a religious revival waiting just around the corner and that the tenets of secularization raised mid 20<sup>th</sup> century may have been premature (e.g. Berger, 1996; Stark, 2015), trends towards declining levels of religious affiliation and the reality of a secular world persist (Bruce, 2002, 2014). Although secularization is variously conceived of not only by theorists (c.f. Chaves, 1994), but also within cultures, for example Turkey (Sevinc, Hood, and Coleman, Forthcoming), current estimates place the

number of nonreligious in the world at 26% excluding China and 44% including China (Keysar, Forthcoming). In the United States, between 2007 and 2014, individuals who self describe as “Christian” has seen an almost 8% decline (currently residing at 70.6%), while atheist, agnostic, and “nothing in particular” has increased over 6% to reach 22.8% of the population (Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project, 2015). Clearly growth has occurred in nonreligious self-identification, but will it continue?

In their research note “Simple Markov Model for Estimating the Growth of Nonreligion in the United States,” Stinespring and Cragun present a data driven model predicting a large increase in secular identity. Using data from the General Social Survey between 1973 and 2012, using a market share approach to religious and nonreligious identity, they forecast between 26% and 47% of the US population will be nonreligious by the year 2042. However, could forces other than secularization be driving these trends? Unlikely, as Stinespring and Cragun suggest (100):

If the rise of the nones was solely due to the decline of a single religion due to a particular crisis or controversy, our model would need to reflect that fact. But the rise of the nonreligious over the last three decades cannot be attributed to a single controversy or crisis but rather to a broad level trend – secularization (Bruce, 2002; 2014; Cragun and Lawson, 2010; Sherkat, 2014).

While valuable from a purely sociological perspective, their secularization model also has implications for socio-cultural evolution (Stuart-Fox, 2015). Here, their predictions might entail a significant shift in worldview is on the horizon and as religious representations in the mind fail to initiate the self-perpetuating religious behavior they once did, they may be abandoned in favor of new nonreligious worldviews, whatever they may be.

### The Secularity of Academics

The long history of atheism, variously defined, has appeared to reside predominantly, but not exclusively, amongst societies more educated individuals – scientists, teachers, philosophers, and so on and so forth. There are many reasons behind this trend, of course, but from a psychological perspective, some key factors may pertain to cognitive style (Morgan, 2014), such as tendencies toward analytic thinking (Gervais and Norenzayan, 2012) and systemizing (Caldwell-Harris and Jordan, 2014).

Whereas these tendencies have been found in quantitative psychological approaches to date (c.f., Beit-Hallahmi, 2015; Caldwell-Harris, 2012), their appearance can also be seen in individual case studies (Coleman, Silver, and Hood, in press; Coleman et al., in press). However, cognitive styles can only account for so much when explaining the high number of academics who are secular. Other factors surely contribute.

In his article “Explaining the Secularity of Academics: Historical Questions and Psychological Findings,” Beit-Hallahmi draws attention to not only the *mind* of academics, but also the historical contexts and the structural differences of academia and religion, which can contribute to what Leuba (1934) proclaimed as the “eminence effect.” The eminence effect being, that the leading scientists and scholars in any given field are typically also the least religious. In his summarization of a vast amount of scholarly literature bearing on the secularity of academics in comparison with the more religious, Beit-Hallahmi (115) concludes:

There is a huge gap between the openness of science in principle, and the reality which deprives individuals from highly religious families of the opportunity to study it. This is a form of deprivation, but those families follow other ideals, and things are not likely to change. The religious composition of academics worldwide is a significant bit of data, and tells us something about the modern age, when anti-authoritarianism and skepticism are handsomely (or less than that) rewarded.

While having a PhD is certainly no guarantee of atheism or secularity, a strong relationship between them exists. Even the ancient Greek philosopher Xenophanes, while a classical theist by today’s standards, shunned the popular religious understandings of the Homeric gods of his day and believed in a radically different god than those of his fellow countrymen (Feyerabend, 1999). Thus, although many academicians are fairly secular, if not atheist, even those who are “religious” likely differ markedly from laybelievers. Why is this the case? Beit-Hallahmi’s theorization offers up several possible reasons.

### Imagining God or Implicitly Believing?

What happens when a nonbeliever is prompted to imagine a god? This is an important question posed

by Bradley, Exline, and Uzdevines's study (120-130), which will be introduced shortly, however it is a question nested in the nuances of what it means or does not mean, to have a representation or image in the mind. In many respects, this is a question that should be at the heart all research on belief or nonbelief in God (Jong, 2013), and as such, we wish to introduce the study by Bradley and colleagues, by first drawing attention to this critical question.

Can something individuals do not believe in or believe is not "real" carry psychological weight, affect cognition and possibly behavior, and so forth? Of course! For example, Rozin, Millman, and Nemeroff (1986) demonstrated that people refuse to eat fudge that is shaped like dog feces and are more hesitant to throw darts at pictures of favorable individuals. In these cases, the individuals certainly *do not believe* that the delicious fudge really is dog excrement or that a loved one really is going to be injured if they lob a dart at their picture. Additionally, and in elucidating the point that even entities or events that are not real, or for that matter not believed to be real, can cause affective and behavioral responses, the underlying mechanisms responsible for these reactions, be it pure association, disgust, contagion or something yet to be determined, is not the issue. What is the issue is that one does not have to believe in something in order to be affected by the mental representation of that something, whatever it may be (Albahari, 2013; Gendler, 2008). As such, studies suggesting that even some atheists have the potential to become emotionally aroused when daring God to do bad things are not as provocative as they might appear at first glance (e.g., Linderman, Heywood, Riecki, and Makkonen, 2014).

Another provocative comparison that has been used in the psychology of religion specifically is the comparison of measuring "Who is a racist?" with "Who is a believer?" (e.g., Barrett, 2012). On one hand, it is obvious that, in many cases a person who *is* racist might not own up to this belief. But on the other hand as the example above demonstrated, one can be disposed to emotions or behavior by representations that are not believed in, or that are not "real" simply in virtue of having said information in one's cognitive repertoire. (For example, it would make little sense to say that a man shouting at his T.V. for the quarterback to "pass the ball already" implicitly believes or even imagines that this football player can hear him [Gendler, 2008].) However, psychologists have developed ways of measuring "beliefs" that may not be

explicitly stated, using implicit measures (e.g., Jong, 2013; Jong, Halberstadt, and Bleumke, 2012). The issue here is relational and involves assumptions about representations in the mind that one is aware of and/or endorses, versus others that may not be consciously accessible and/or endorsed (Gervais et al., 2011). As Barrett, (2012, 201) suggests:

Often measuring who is and is not a supernaturalist in the cognitive sense is a little like trying to measure who is a racist – some people will deny it, but their behaviors tell a different story.

Further, studies have demonstrated that even when Whites are primed with a black faces, as opposed to white faces, this automatically increases the response time needed to identify a gun and when in a speeded condition, individuals automatically misidentify common tools as guns (Payne, 2001). However, none of this is even partial guarantee of the individual actually being a racist. *Contra* Barrett (2012), behaviors that can be elicited in a laboratory or other sitting, do not necessarily imply an individual is a racist or that they are "implicitly racist," only that conceptual content in the mind may have become activated and that associations between the measured variables exist, however the reasons for these associations are opaque and potentially numerous (Albahari, 2013; Fazio and Olson, 2003; Gendler, 2008). Thus, while Barrett (2012) uses the case of racism as analogy to imply that, perhaps, many nonbelievers are "implicitly believers," this can be misleading.

For example, in Fazio and Olson's (2003) review of implicit measures commonly used in social cognition research, they have suggested that one limitation of implicit association tests (IAT) is its inability to separate individual knowledge from cultural knowledge. Here, responding in a particular fashion on an IAT might not actually reflect personally held attitudes, but simply culturally available information. Information, such that, even a particular individual who deeply avows not endorsing belief *X* may respond "as if" they do, due to having associations in their mind that link the endorsement of belief *X* by other individuals in their culture to the target stimuli in question. Implicit associations can certainly be tested with the implicit association test, but whether or not these get to count for "beliefs" is an open question (Jong, 2013).

Similarly, and elsewhere in studies pertaining to nonbelievers, it has become common fare to tout a "divided



mind” to atheists (e.g., Järnefelt, Canfield, and Keleman, 2015) and build on the often discordant nature of an endorsed belief when compared to an “implicit” or speeded *response* (e.g., Jong, Halberstadt, and Bluemke, 2012; Heywood and Bering, 2014; Linderman, Heywood, Rieki, and Makkonen, 2014). Depending on what it means to have a specific representation in the mind, why it may be there, and how it is accessed has yet to be adequately addressed in CSR or the psychology of religion (Gervais et al., 2011; Jong, 2013). If nonbelievers may be “implicitly religious,” and if this is taken serve as meaningful ontological ground for discussion, then we suggest drawing attention the fact that most religious individuals implicitly believe – perhaps *really* believe – despite their explicit orations, in an average god of average human strength and an IQ score of around 100 (Jong, Kavanagh, and Visala, 2015; for review, see Heiphetz, Lane, Waytz, and Young, 2015). Importantly, we wish to bring this occurrence to *conscious awareness* not in an accusatory attempt to suggest any of the aforementioned research is somehow biased, but only to reinforce Jong’s (2013, 76) call to seriously and critically consider what it means to have a belief as “those of us who are committed to the study of religion [and nonbelief] – have to join in this discussion<sup>4</sup>.” While there are conceptual conundrums involved in answering this question, it is a question that also elicits great empirical concern.

Throughout history, God has been conceived of as the cause or impetus of every phenomenon imaginable, from the occurrence of life itself (Shook, 2010), to even more mundane aspects of life, such as what book to read or what clothes to wear (Luhmann, 2012). While a representation of God may certainly affect believers, can a hypothetical god affect nonbelievers? Moreover, is it even feasible to probe nonbelievers for a “god image,” something they do not believe in and may not exist? Furthermore, if they are able to imagine a god, is this a cold, evil, tyrant deity ready to banish the atheist to Hell? Or, perhaps a more loving god, someone hardly concerned with the spread of fire and brimstone?

### The God of Nonbelievers: Characteristics of a Hypothetical God

These questions have answers and Bradley, Exline and Uzdevines’s study, titled “The God of Nonbelievers: Characteristics of a Hypothetical God” provide initial data. Drawing on their sample of 393 atheists, the authors report the imagined characteristics of a god in relation to the individual’s personality traits, using the Big Five, adult attachment, as well as level of pri-

ori religious and nonreligious participation and desire to believe a god exists. Bradley, Exline and Uzdevines (127) conclude:

...that nonbelievers who think about god in terms of prior personal belief think of a more loving god, rather than being filled with anger, hatred, or other negative emotions toward god. On the other hand, nonbelievers who think about god in terms of popular teachings about god see god as a cruel being.

Bradley and colleagues study suggests that for those nonbelievers who are capable of, or who choose to, imagine a hypothetical god, their imagined or prior conceptions of this deity may be influenced by the context in which the representation was learned. As prior theorization and studies have suggested, context matters (for review see, Gervais et al., 2011 [Henrich, 2009; Lanman, 2012, 2013; Willard, 2015]). In closing, we offer appreciation for the authors careful attention to the nuanced question discussed in our introduction about belief and representation. Here, Bradley, Exline and Uzdevines’s study has taken care to avoid confusing the capability to hold a god image in the mind with actually believing in this representation or implying this is what atheists may “implicitly” believe.

### Exiting the Ark: Rabbinical Deconversion

Anyone who has ever read a good book knows they can be hard to put down once you start reading. Good books can captivate us; they pull us in with their rich narrative and evoked imagery – a good book can have lasting effects. Like wise, “The Good Book”—that is, the Bible—is even harder to put down, especially when one’s sole source of income is preaching from it. For many clergy, who may know of no other trade, no other way to make a living, no other way to support themselves, their spouse, kids and dog, it can be especially hard to put down – even long after they stopped believing. Furthermore, their position as a religious official may lie at the heart of their social life, constituting the majority of one’s friends and acquaintances. Leaving behind your religion can be like socio-economic suicide. Recent research from Dennett and LaScola (2013/2015), published in their book *Caught in the Pulpit*, details such struggles, both internal and external, for these former persons of faith as the world they reside in has become but a mere facade. Indeed, the past 15 years has seen further psychological and sociological research accrue exploring the complex-

ities of deconversion (e.g., Fazzino, 2014; Frankenthaler, 2015; Keller, Klein, Hood, and Streib, 2013; Streib et al., 2009; Paloutzian, Murken, Streib, and Rößler-Namini, 2013). However, if some Christian pastors are caught in the pulpit and trying to leave, then Jewish Rabbis' must escape the Ark.

### When Rabbis Lose Faith: Twelve rabbis tell their stories about their loss of belief in God

In his research article, titled "When Rabbis Lose Faith: Twelve rabbis tell their stories about their loss of belief in God," Shrell-Fox analyzes deconversion narratives from 12 Rabbis' in Israel. Whereas Judaism typically emphasizes "deed over creed" when compared to Christianity, he discovered that several of the Rabbis' actually showed little existential angst as non-believers in religious leadership roles. In many cases, they have reframed ritual practice and instead, focus on social solidarity (i.e., belonging, Keysar, 2014) or shift prayer focus away from God and towards secular philosophical insight. However, an open eye during prayer time may still be able to uncover the unfaithful. As Shrell-Fox (141) suggests:

Joseph, whose story reflects the combination of two rabbis' stories, would say that those congregants who are acute observers of human behavior will be able to tell that he is not praying. There are certain motions a praying Jew makes. He does not make them. There are certain times when one is expected to mouth words, or say them aloud; he does not.

With secularization trending into the future, deconversions will continue. However, for those whose livelihood revolves around the financial and social success of religious institutions, exiting this so-called "form of life" (Wittgenstein, 1953) may be much harder endeavor. But, the evidence is clear; we needn't confuse all pastoral and rabbinical leaders as "believers." A "big question" remains; just how many atheist clergy are there? While the popular quip of "no atheists in foxholes" may be amusing, the research of Shrell-Fox and his contemporaries assures us that at the very least there are atheists in the pulpit—and the Ark.

### Book Reviews

The reviewing of academic books constitutes an extremely important service to the scientific and scholarly endeavor. While most books (hopefully all) are typically reviewed prepublication by anywhere from

only one, to even three or more experts in a given field, the vast amount of scholarship that has been published in the history of the human quest for knowledge and the many incommensurable interpretations of this literature far exceeds the capabilities of even the top intellectuals to critique and parse apart its many invaluable nuances. Thus, book reviews contribute significantly, although often underappreciated, to our present corpus of knowledge and with its continued growth, their importance can only increase.

In her review of Trent Dougherty's (2014) book, *The Problem of Animal Pain: A Theodicy for All Creatures Great and Small*, Goodnick offers both praise and critique for Dougherty's attempt to construct a reprieve for, as he sees it, the necessary suffering of animals under a just God (which are later reincarnated in a C. S. Lewis/Narnian fashion). However, while Goodnick (152) suggests "Dougherty has presented a successful defense against the problem of animal pain," she is "not convinced by it as a theodicy."

In his review of Bradley and Tate's (2010) book, *The New Atheist Novel: Fiction, Philosophy and Polemic after 9/11*, Mann details how these authors have dissected four popular books of literary fiction (by Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, Philip Pullman, and Salman Rushdie), which subtly intertwine and introduce "New Atheist philosophies" into their contemporary fiction. While Mann suggests Bradley and Tate (2010) may chide these authors for "rejecting a certain mode of transcendence while championing another," he finds their book is "more an exercise in relativism than anything else" (154). New atheist novels continue a long tradition of the interface between religion and novels. For example, Dawn Coleman (2013) masterfully documents the suspicion of previous generations of preachers, of the seductive power of novels to challenge the pious. She not only documents how eighteenth century preachers compared the emerging American novel to junk food and alcohol, recommending temperance at best, and abstinence as most desirable. But, she also notes how the cannon of the seemingly American secular novel incorporated preaching into their narratives indicating that the new atheism intertwine in contemporary fiction continues a tradition that blurs any firm distinction as to what is secular and what is religious.

In her review of Zuckerman's (2014) book, *Living the Secular Life: New Answers to Old Questions*, Schutz (page) delivers a chapter-by-chapter overview of pre-

cisely how this secular life might be lived, noting this “is no small task”. While she suggests Zuckerman’s book is clearly meant for a popular audience, its narrative is driven by his extensive scholarship. In the end, Schutz (156) finds the book both “engaging” and “relatable,” the type of book one shares “with their religious friends and family and say[s], “This is me. If you want to understand, read.”

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we would like to thank SRC Editor-in-Chief Gregg Caruso, SRC Associate Editors Buckareff, Collins, Flanagan, Symons, and Teehan, SRC copy editor Irfan Rasool and the SRC Editorial Board for the opportunity to guest edit the first special issue of this journal. Further, we greatly appreciate the Smith & Franklin Academic Publishing Corporation for their dedication to and support of Open Access publishing.

We are very much indebted to and thankful for the many scholars who assisted in the reviewing of manuscripts for this issue. Without you, there would be no special issue. The reviewers are listed in alphabetical order as follows: *Christopher R. Cotter*, PhD Candidate, Lancaster University, Department of Politics, Philosophy & Religion, Editor-in-Chief at The Religious Studies Project; *Lori L. Fazzino*, PhD Candidate in the Department of Sociology at University of Nevada, Las Vegas; *Jenny M. Holcombe*, Associate Professor in the College of Health, Education, and Professional Studies at The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga; *Ralph W. Hood Jr.*, Professor of Psychology in the Department of Psychology at The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga; *Eric Kaufmann*, Professor of Politics, Birkbeck University of London; *Ariela Keysar*, Associate Research Professor at Trinity College, and Associate Director of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture; *Terry Larm*, Independent Academic, philosopher; *Linda LaScola*, Independent Academic, LaScola Qualitative Research; *Stephen LeDrew*, Uppsala University, Department of Theology; *Lois Lee*, Research Associate in the Department of Political Science at University College London; *Juhem Navarro-Rivera*, Research Scholar, El Instituto of Latin American, Latino, and Caribbean Studies, University of Connecticut (Storrs, CT); *Raymond F. Paloutzian*, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Westmont College; *Brian Ribeiro*, UC Foundation Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy at The University of Tennessee at Chatta-

nooga; *Matt Sheedy*, PhD, Department of Religion at the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg; *John R. Shook*, Philosophy Department, University at Buffalo, New York; *Jesse M. Smith*, Assistant Professor of Sociology in the Department of Sociology at Western Michigan University; *Heinz Streib*, Bielefeld University, Research Center for biographical Studies in Contemporary Religion; *Teemu Taira*, University of Turku, Department of Comparative Religion.

\*We are thankful to Luke Galen and Jonathan Jong who provided helpful feedback and comments on an earlier version of this introduction.

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## Endnotes

[1] This example is borrowed (and cited in full) from Cragun, Hammer, and Nielsen's article.

[2] <http://chattfreethought.com/>

[3] <https://www.facebook.com/HumanistAssembly>

[4] Furthermore, we certainly acknowledge the long history of discordant novelty that makes so much of social psychology research interesting to humans in general and nonscientists in particular, however addressing how researchers frame their studies is an issue for future articles.