

A SECULAR MIND: TOWARDS A  
COGNITIVE ANTHROPOLOGY OF  
ATHEISM

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JONATHAN A. LANMAN  
MA, MSc  
Centre for Anthropology & Mind  
School of Anthropology & Museum Ethnography  
Magdalen College  
University of Oxford

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Jonathan A. Lanman  
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**ABSTRACT**

This thesis presents descriptive and explanatory accounts of both non-theism, the lack of belief in the existence of supernatural agents, and strong atheism, the moral opposition to such beliefs on the grounds that they are both harmful and signs of weak character. Based on my fieldwork with non-theist groups and individuals in the United States, United Kingdom, and Denmark, an online survey of over 3,000 non-theists from over 50 countries, and theories from both the social and cognitive sciences, I offer a new account of why nations with low economic and normative threats produce high levels of non-theism. This account is offered in place of the common explanation that religious beliefs provide comfort in threatening circumstances, which I show to be both anthropologically and psychologically problematic.

My account centres on the role of threats, both existential and normative, in increasing commitment to ingroup ideologies, many of which are religious, and the important role of witnessing displays of commitment to religious beliefs in producing such beliefs in each new generation. In environments with low levels of personal and normative threat, commitment to religious ideologies decreases, extrinsic reasons for religious participation decrease, and superstitious actions decrease. Given the human tendency to believe the communications of others to the extent that they are backed up by action, such a decrease in displays of commitment to religious beliefs leads to increased non-theism in the span of a generation.

In relation to strong atheism, I document a correlation, both geographical and chronological, between strong atheism and the presence of religious beliefs and demands in the public sphere. I then offer an explanation of this correlation based on the effects of threats against a modern normative order characterized by philosopher Charles Taylor as a system of mutual benefit and individual liberty.

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## Introduction

### Non-Theism and Strong Atheism

In November of 2006, contributing editor of *Wired* magazine, Gary Wolf, published an article on what he called “the new atheism” (Wolf 2006). In it, Wolf outlined the rise in the notoriety of atheism in Western countries in the previous five years, describing not only his visits to atheist and religious groups but his interviews with three of the most well-known atheists, all of which had recently written books questioning both the veracity and the moral status of religion: Richard Dawkins (2006), Sam Harris (2004, 2006), and Dan Dennett (2006).

Wolf accurately describes the intellectual and moral position of these individuals, and of many self-identifying “atheists” in the modern West. For many atheists, religious beliefs are not only mistaken and religious practices are not only a waste of time, but such beliefs and practices are also fundamentally immoral. They are considered immoral in that they are thought to cause a great deal of harm to both individual minds (many atheists I spoke with likened teaching children to believe in God/gods to child abuse) and to society (Sam Harris and many other atheists see religious extremism in an age of nuclear weapons as a recipe for, as one atheist told me, “the end of civilization).”

Wolf, himself, however, cannot agree with the “new atheist” indictment of religion. He realizes through his conversations with Dawkins and Harris, “what kind of atheist [he wants] to be,” and it is not the kind that labels religious beliefs in general as harmful and likely to be the cause of the downfall of human civilization. He

“sympathizes” intellectually with the new atheists, but rejects both their polemics and their “tone of certainty,” which reminds Wolf of religious fundamentalism.

Wolf’s article was not only published in the print and online versions of *Wired*, but also on many of the numerous atheist websites that have flourished on the web in the last five years. A perusal of the comments of these websites’ members makes clear that not all atheists agree with Wolf’s portrayal. The most common objection, one present both in online responses and in my conversations with self-identified atheists about this and other similar articles, concerns the charge that atheists are certain, dogmatic, and fundamentalist in a manner similar to religious fundamentalists. A commentator on [richarddawkins.net](http://richarddawkins.net), for example asks:

“Why is it so difficult for these people to understand that while not being 100% sure of anything, when there's simply no evidentiary reason to believe something, we should just put that something into an 'imaginary' category? It seems to be hair-splitting to people who don't share Dawkins' viewpoint, but it is a ridiculously important distinction to understand. The absence of faith is not just another version of dogmatic faith. It's something else entirely.”

Others argue that the “actual” meaning of the word atheism is without gods, implying merely the lack of belief in the existence of God or gods, and that to call “atheism” anything more, such as a dogmatic assertion of the non-existence of supernatural agents or a moralistic rejection of religious values, is to mistake atheism for something it is not.

I found the dynamics outlined above, with some individuals having no beliefs in supernatural agents and also rejecting religion in general as harmful and dangerous, others having no such beliefs but not seeing religion as intrinsically harmful or dangerous, and also some individuals having no beliefs in supernatural agents but still

participating in religions such as Christianity, throughout the United States, the United Kingdom, and Denmark.

I found, then, no consensus on what “atheism” itself entailed. I did find, however, two phenomena that many, in different places and for different reasons, have called “atheism.”<sup>1</sup> One phenomenon is simply the lack of belief in the existence of supernatural agents. This lack of belief can be coupled with a variety of views on the moral status of religious beliefs, behaviours, and people. A second phenomenon is the view that religious beliefs are not only mistaken, but immoral and to be opposed. Holding this latter view automatically entails the first, but again and again, through media pieces such as Wolf’s and the protests I heard from many self-identified atheists, it was made clear to me that the former view does not automatically entail the latter.

In this thesis, I will explore these two phenomena. I will attempt to more fully describe them as they exist in the sentiments and actions of many modern Westerners and also investigate how cognitive and social forces contribute to not only their existence, but their larger patterns of distribution. Some countries, for example, exhibit high levels of the former but minimal levels of the latter. So as to avoid further confusion, I will label the phenomenon of a lack of belief in the existence of supernatural agencies “non-theism,” so as not to connote the anti-religious sentiments attached to the term “atheism”

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<sup>1</sup> Several online commentators defending atheists from charges of dogmatism, for instance, frequently point to what they see as the original or actual meaning of the word atheism, without gods. Christian theologian Alister McGrath, by contrast, has written a book entitled “The Twilight of Atheism” (2004) that concerns itself only with the “movement” of atheism as not only an intellectual but a moral battle with religion. For McGrath, atheism is defined not merely as a lack of belief in the existence of supernatural agency, but a specific historical movement and ideology that had a rise, and, more recently, a fall.

in the minds of many.<sup>2</sup> I will label the phenomenon of both the intellectual and moral rejection of religion as “strong atheism,” so as to emphasize its ideological nature.

In my effort to explain the construction and distribution of both non-theism and strong atheism, an important first step was to notice, through ethnographic fieldwork and large sociological surveys, broad geographical trends in their presence. Some environments, such as the Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, produce high levels of non-theism but low levels of strong atheism. The United States, by contrast, produces very low levels of non-theism, yet, among those non-theists, there exists a high level of strong atheism.

In the United States, for example, upon my mentioning that I was researching atheism, I frequently perceived the introduction of tenseness in the conversation, as many, especially in the Midwest, felt uncomfortable even discussing atheism, much less espousing it. On half a dozen occasions, I was asked whether or not there really are atheists, as these individuals could not imagine someone who “deep down,” does not believe in the existence of the Christian God. What I found most often in casual conversations in the United States were theists who desired to ask me questions about atheism, to let me know what they see as problematic about atheism, or to offer me theories about why atheists had “strayed” from the proper path of faith. Despite this difficulty in meeting individual atheists in the United States, finding organized groups of atheists was much easier. A quick online search, for instance, revealed nearly a dozen atheist and humanist groups in the San Francisco Bay Area, three of which I was able to visit during my time there.

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that, according to my definition of non-theism, self-identified agnostics qualify as non-theists, as they do not have a belief in the existence of supernatural agents.

In Copenhagen, Denmark, by contrast, nearly every person I spoke with either was a non-theist or told me that many of their friends and colleagues were non-theists. I could also perceive significantly less tension in such conversations, as despite the fact that religious views are considered very private matters in Denmark, whether or not one is or is not religious is not considered by most to be “an issue” in social relationships. However, of the numerous non-theists I met, few were comfortable describing themselves as “atheists.” Most Danes I spoke with shared Wolf’s sentiments and saw “atheism” as too sure of itself and unnecessarily harsh in its condemnation of religious belief and practice. Several Danes made it clear to me, for instance, that while they did not think there are any supernatural agents, there may well be “more between heaven and earth.”<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, given this hesitance, organized atheism was much harder to find in Copenhagen. A few national level atheist and humanist organizations had been founded in the last five to ten years, but none of them had regular meetings for me to attend, much less the weekly meetings held by such American organizations as the Rationalist Society in St. Louis. Moreover, when I did discover the Copenhagen Area Atheist Meetup Group, through the website Meetup.com,<sup>4</sup> I discovered that the majority of its attendees were actually American expatriates living in Copenhagen. There were some native Danes in the group, but they were by no means the majority.

My observations suggest that the United States has a relatively low number of non-theists, but a relatively high level of strong atheism, that the Scandinavian countries of Denmark and Sweden have a higher percentage of non-theists but relatively low levels

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<sup>3</sup> These experiences broadly match those of sociologist Phil Zuckerman, who spent a year in Denmark interviewing well over 100 Danes about atheism and religion (Zuckerman 2008).

<sup>4</sup> The variety of atheist groups, online and off, as well as more information about Meetup.com, can be found in chapter eight.

of strong atheism, and that the United Kingdom comes somewhere in between on both non-theism and strong atheism. This suggestion is backed up by a number of large scale social surveys conducted over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in dozens of countries, including Gallup polls and the nationally representative World Values Surveys (WVS) and European Values Surveys (EVS). In the 2001 WVS, for example, only 46% of Swedes and 62% of Danes answered “Yes” to the question, “Do you believe in God? Yes/No/Don’t Know,” compared with 94% for the United States (Norris and Inglehart 2007, 90). Similarly, sociologist Phil Zuckerman, after reviewing many of the existing cross-national surveys, concludes that the existing survey data point to somewhere between 43% and 80% of Danes being non-theists, depending on the exact wording of the question. Conversely, Zuckerman concludes that only 3% to 9% of Americans are non-theistic (Zuckerman 2007).

The challenge presented by the qualitative and quantitative data above is how to account for these cross-national differences. Why is it the case that non-theism should be much more prevalent in Scandinavia than anywhere else in the world? Why is the United States so theistic but also in possession of so much strong atheist activity? If we were able to answer these questions, we would discover much about how both theism and non-theism, religion and irreligion, come about in human minds and societies.

The most strongly supported explanation for these differences comes from recent work in the sociology of religion suggesting that the substantial cross-national differences in levels of religious belief and practice are largely attributable to differences in levels of “security,” or to utilize the term of the two main proponents of the theory, political scientists Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, “existential security” (Norris and Inglehart

2004). Existential security, according to Norris and Inglehart, is the degree to which individuals feel that their survival and well-being can be taken for granted. It is a subjective variable that they measure according to objective scales of societal health including, but not limited to, the United Nation's Human Development Index, the GINI coefficient for income inequality, per capita GDP, adult illiteracy rate, AIDS cases per 100,000 people, infant mortality and child mortality rates, doctors per 100,000 people, and life expectancy at birth (Norris and Inglehart 2004, 62). All of the above factors produce moderate to large correlations (positive or negative in accordance with the existential security hypothesis) with quantitative measures of religious participation and prayer on the WVS in analyses of 60-75 countries. Further, after following United Nations conventions on classifying societies as agrarian, industrial, and post-industrial, Norris and Inglehart find significant and substantial differences between the three types of society on measures of the "importance of religion" in individuals' lives. Norris and Inglehart also present evidence from over 50 years of national level surveys that the Scandinavian welfare states have seen a significant decrease in levels of "belief in God" since the Second World War, while the United States, with its high inequality and minimal social welfare provisions, has not (Norris and Inglehart 2004, 90).

Each of the above strands of evidence faces its own difficulties. Yet, they all point to the same conclusion: the more developed and secure a country is, and the more equally its resources are shared throughout its population, the less religious activity there is in that country.

In addition to the work of Norris and Inglehart, the work of political scientists Anthony Gill and Erik Lundsgaarde also supports this explanation and the specific claim

that differences in human security can not only help account for the general world-wide correlation, but also help explain the outlier of the United States, which is both a wealthy and highly religious country (Gill and Lundsgaarde 2004). Gill and Lundsgaarde use only one predicting variable, the percentage of a country's GDP spent each year on social welfare, as measured by the International Monetary Fund. They find a large and statistically significant negative correlation between social welfare spending and church attendance in an analysis of 22 countries as well as a positive correlation between welfare spending and the "non-religious" rate of the country, that is, the ratio of people in the country who on large scale national surveys identify themselves as "non-religious," a measure encompassing affiliation and, they argue, belief in addition to participation.

Both Norris and Inglehart (2004) and Gill and Lundsgaarde (2004) argue that their findings help explain not only a general international trend but can also help account for why the United States, among modern, post-industrial Western countries, maintains such a high level of religious belief and behaviour. For Norris and Inglehart, the fact that the United States has much more economic inequality than other Western nations means that many people in the United States do not obtain the same existential security as others in the country. For Gill and Lundsgaarde, the fact that the United States spends a much smaller percentage of its GDP on social welfare than other Western nations has a similar effect, producing a great many insecure individuals.

Underlying this account is a psychological theory of how the environmental factors associated with existential security can actually affect individual minds to make those individuals more likely to participate in religious groups and to believe in

God/gods. For Norris and Inglehart, the answer lies in the comfort and security that religious ideologies can provide:

“Virtually all of the world’s major religious cultures provide reassurance that, even though the individual alone can’t understand or predict what lies ahead, a higher power will ensure that things work out....this belief reduces stress, enabling people to shut out anxiety and focus on coping with their immediate problems. Without such a belief system, extreme stress tends to produce withdrawal reactions” (2004, 19).

Norris and Inglehart argue that human beings have a “need” to feel secure and that things will “work out,” and that, the more insecure life is and the more it seems as if things do not work out, the more people need the consolations of religious beliefs and practices. They do not argue, however, that changes in the conditions of existential security in a country will immediately have a large impact on the population’s level of religiosity. Instead, they argue that such changes in the population will be gradual. The importance an individual places on religiosity and the degree to which they participate and hold to religious beliefs, they argue, is the product of the environment in which they grew up (2004). Thus, even for middle-aged individuals in Scandinavia in the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the implementation of more extensive social welfare measures would not result in their abandoning their religious beliefs and affiliations. Rather, the next generation of Scandinavians would grow up in a more existentially secure environment and would feel less “need” for religious beliefs and practices.

### Remaining Questions

Both the data concerning cross-national differences in levels of non-theism and the most dominant explanation provided by Norris and Inglehart leave many questions

unanswered. The WVS and similar surveys employed by Norris and Inglehart and Gill and Lundsgaarde, for instance, are quite crude if we are interested in non-theism, as they normally only ask about “God” rather than a wider variety of supernatural agents including ghosts and ancestor spirits and, moreover, do not define precisely what “God” in the context of the question means. The question arises, then, of whether or not the “non-theists” identified in such surveys really lack belief in the existence of supernatural agencies or whether they simply reject a particular, socio-culturally prominent supernatural agent, “God.” Moreover, in light of work in the cognitive science of religion on the possible existence of unconscious or “implicit” religious beliefs among atheists (Bering 2006b), it is an open question as to whether non-theists possess such beliefs in spite of their explicit non-theism.

There are also questions surrounding the scientific legitimacy of the term “belief,” which is in many cases employed non-critically within scientific accounts such as those of Norris and Inglehart. If “beliefs” do not have an objective existence beyond our theoretical and cultural perspectives, then a scientific account of what causes and influence theism and non-theism is a futile enterprise.

We are also faced with the matter of squaring the “comfort” explanation of Norris and Inglehart with both anthropological and psychological evidence that casts significant doubt on the notion that individuals believe in religious ideologies and participate in religious groups because they find them comforting and reassuring. If the comfort hypothesis is found lacking, how are we to explain, at the psychological level, the compelling sociological data concerning existential security and religiosity?

Another important question is the veracity of claims that differences in welfare expenditures and economic inequality can explain why two post-industrial nations, the United States and Denmark, can be so radically different in their respective levels of religiosity. The larger claim that measures of existential security, including income equality and welfare expenditure, are correlated with levels of religious belief and behaviour is well supported when including both wealthy, post-industrial nations and poor, agrarian nations in the analysis.<sup>5</sup> What is questionable is whether or not the smaller economic differences between the United States and nations with low inequality and high welfare spending like Denmark are enough to account for the drastic differences between these countries on measures of religiosity. The United States is much closer in matters of human security to nations such as Denmark than it is to nations such as Namibia. Yet, the United States is much closer in matters of religiosity to nations such as Namibia than it is to nations such as Denmark. It is questionable, then, whether or not economic variables alone can account for these differences.

We are also left with the task of explaining strong atheism and the different levels in strong atheist activity across nations. How are we to explain the common moral condemnation of religion among strong atheists and the lack of such moral condemnation among other non-theists when a growing body of evidence in the cognitive sciences suggests that human beings, by virtue of their common evolutionary heritage, share a common set of moral intuitions? Why has the moral condemnation of religion arisen in the West, and why only in the last few centuries? Further, why do we see the strong

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<sup>5</sup> In the UN's Human Development Index, as reviewed by Norris and Inglehart (2004), post-industrial societies have an HDI score over .900 and a mean per capita GDP of at least \$29,585. Agrarian societies, by contrast, have HDI's of .739 or below and a mean per capita GDP of \$1,098 or less.

geographical differences in strong atheism? Why is it so prevalent in the United States and so absent in Denmark?

Answering the questions above not only allows us to better describe and explain non-theism and strong atheism, but also helps us move forward in two important areas of research in the social and cognitive sciences. One important area to which answering these questions will contribute is the cognitive science of religion (CSR), which over the past two decades has offered new, evidentially-supported explanations of the persistence of beliefs in the existence of supernatural agents (Guthrie 1993; Boyer 1994, 2001; Atran 2002; Pyysiäinen 2001; Barrett 2004; Bering 2006b) and patterns of ritual practice (Lawson and McCauley 1990; McCauley and Lawson 2002; Whitehouse 2000, 2004). The majority of work in CSR has concerned how universal features of human cognition, such as intuitive ontologies (Boyer 2001), agency detection devices (Guthrie 1993; Boyer 2001; Barrett 2004), action representation systems (McCauley and Lawson 2002), and mnemonic systems (Whitehouse 2004), work to make particular types of beliefs and practices more likely to survive and thrive in human populations. The data presented above concerning large cross-national differences in religiosity, however, suggest that environmental conditions, in addition to universal cognitive mechanisms, are also responsible for the persistence of religious beliefs and practices. In the Scandinavian welfare states, for instance, the universal cognitive mechanisms identified by cognitive scientists of religion do not appear to be sufficient for producing explicit religious beliefs in most of the population. Answering the questions presented above concerning the distribution of non-theism and the psychological dynamics that connect the environmental conditions of security/insecurity to individual belief and practice can help

move the cognitive science of religion forward in addressing the causes of both theism and non-theism, religion and its absence.

Another area to which answering the questions asked above can contribute is the long-standing secularization debate. Many of the founders of the social sciences, including Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber, as well as many social scientists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as Bryan Wilson (1982) and Steve Bruce (2002), argue that modern industrial society “causes problems for religion” (Bruce 2002, 2). This broad consensus came to an end in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as fundamentalist movements within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as a plethora of “new age” beliefs flourished in modern industrialized democracies (Berger 1999). Many scholars, including sociologist Peter Berger, abandoned the secularization hypothesis while others, such as Rodney Stark and his colleagues, began to argue that real secularization is impossible because of humanity’s never-ending demand for supernatural compensation, such as the promise of eternal life (Stark and Bainbridge 1987; Stark 1999).

Much of the debate between those viewing secularization as real and those viewing secularization as a myth sheds more heat than light, as different scholars focus on different phenomena under the broad heading of secularization, from the loss of religious influence in social institutions to the growing number of self-identified atheists. Sociologist Jose Casanova laments that, “what usually passes for a single theory of secularization is actually made up of three very different, uneven and unintegrated propositions: secularization as differentiation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms, secularization as decline in religious beliefs and practices, and secularization as marginalization of religion to a privatized sphere” (1994). Casanova

goes on to argue that to make any progress on resolving the secularization debate, scholars will need to be more precise about which particular phenomenon they are addressing. Only by being precise about the phenomenon can all of the relevant data and theory be gathered to fruitfully address competing claims.

Addressing the cognitive and socio-cultural causes of theism and non-theism specifically targets the area Casanova labels “decline in religious beliefs and practices.” If we can answer the questions concerning the causes of theism and non-theism, we are in a much better position to address the question of whether or not “modernity,” or some particular elements of modern society, works to produce secularization.

## Methods

In order to answer the questions I am asking in this thesis regarding non-theism and strong atheism, I use a variety of methods including internet surveys, participant observation, and face to face and telephone interviews.<sup>6</sup> This variety allows me to obtain both the detailed contextual information that can only come from fieldwork and quantified information suitable for testing a variety of hypotheses.<sup>7</sup>

Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart utilize the World Values Surveys (WVS) for their analyses of religion, existential security, and secularization. The WVS are periodic representative national surveys of seventy-six nation states, including affluent, mid-level,

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<sup>6</sup> I recognize that experimental methods would be valuable in further testing the explanatory claims I will be making in this thesis and I plan to pursue such studies in the coming years.

<sup>7</sup> Given that none of my surveys are representative and I do not employ controlled laboratory studies, the support that the evidence from my fieldwork and surveys can give to my claims is limited. In order to properly support my claims, large-scale representative surveys and experimental methods will be necessary. This thesis primarily consists in my offering a new account of the distribution of non-theism around the world based on existing representative surveys and existing experimental studies, with my own findings providing further evidence consistent with my explanatory claims.

and poorer countries. They are conducted by a large number of investigators who frequently live in the countries they are surveying and who administer their surveys through face to face interviews (Norris and Inglehart 2004, WVS website).

As the work by Norris and Inglehart and by Gill and Lundsgaarde on religion and social welfare shows, the data obtained from such large scale, representative surveys can be valuable in making international comparisons and testing hypotheses concerning the role of national-level data on beliefs, values, and practices. Yet, for a variety of reasons, from the breadth of the survey to the sometimes problematic use of language or concepts ill-suited for a particular cultural setting, these surveys are quite limited in what they reveal about the nature and causes of non-theism. There are only nine questions, for example, on religious participation, values, and beliefs, and all are quite general. Moreover, while religious participation and religious values (operationalized as “How important is God/religion in your life”) are all measured on a scale, beliefs in God, the afterlife, and the soul are measured by asking “Do you believe in X? Yes or No?” with a third option of “Don’t Know” going unstated but still allowed as a response. Such a protocol fails to detect the different degrees of credibility that people give to such concepts.

While these issues with the concepts and questions use are all limitations in the WVS methodology, the greatest limitation for my purposes is that the WVS are not concerned specifically with non-theism and therefore fail to ask the questions needed to come to a better understanding of the nature and causes of non-theism. For instance, while they do ask participants their religious affiliation and do allow responses of “None” and “Other,” they do not provide an opportunity for participants to define what they take

their self-identifiers to mean. Further, they do not ask about other types of supernatural agents and forces besides God, moral convictions (Haidt 2008), experiences of religious intuitions (Bering 2006), exposure to displays of religious commitment (Henrich 2009), the extent of their religious upbringing (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006), or a host of other questions that would be quite relevant in the attempt to better understand non-theism.

While the WVS are of little help in understanding the details of non-theist views and activities and most scholars of religion focus on its presence rather than its absence, one survey project has specifically examined atheism in the United States. Canadian psychologists Bruce Hunsberger and Bob Altemeyer sought to answer several questions about atheism in their survey project, including whether or not self-identified atheists reject all “supernatural” or “divine” beings and the extent of their religious upbringing, as well as how much they exhibit signs of dogmatism, zealotry, and religious ethnocentrism (2006).

Hunsberger and Altemeyer’s survey is a clear improvement over the WVS in the attempt to better understand the views of non-theists, and the evidence they present for the role of religious upbringing in determining whether one is an atheist or theist is intriguing. Yet, they only sent these surveys to members of active atheist groups and recruited the vast majority of their participants from the San Francisco Bay Area of California. Consequently, their methodology excludes individuals who self-identify as atheists but do not belong to any active organization, those not living in the few areas surveyed, and those who may lack belief in the existence of supernatural agents but choose not to self-identify themselves as atheists. Moreover, without participant

observation or face-to-face interviews, it is difficult to judge whether or not the questions are eliciting the data that Hunsberger and Altemeyer seek.

My survey for non-theists contains questions concerning the self-identifications non-theists employ, how they define those self-identifications, their levels of belief in a variety of supernatural concepts, their activity in any online or “real-world” organizations devoted to atheism, humanism, rationalism, or secularism, the frequency and strength of any theistic intuitions, how positively or negatively they view religion, their moral convictions, how their non-theism is accepted by friends and family, the extent of their religious upbringing, and their exposure to displays of commitment to religious beliefs, as well as a variety of basic demographics such as age, sex, country of residence, and marital status. And while I do not claim that my survey methodology yields a true representative sample of all Western non-theists or self-identifying atheists, I do claim to have obtained a more representative sample than Hunsberger and Altemeyer. Rather than being limited by the postal costs and time it requires to send out physical packets with paper surveys to participants, as Hunsberger and Altemeyer did, I placed my entire survey online using the web service *surveymonkey.com*, allowing me to recruit participants from around the world at minimal cost.<sup>8</sup> And rather than recruiting the vast majority of my participants from a single metropolitan area, I recruited participants through field contacts among atheist and humanist groups in the US, UK, Denmark, and Norway, who emailed my introduction and a link to the survey to their respective mailing

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<sup>8</sup> This service allows researchers to compose a variety of question types from multiple choice to open-ended, to randomize answer choices to particular questions, and for what the site labels “skip logic,” a feature that directs participants to specific questions based on their answers to previous questions.

lists, and also through several websites devoted to atheism and humanism.<sup>9</sup> The advantage of these recruitment methods lies in the fact that I was able to obtain a much more diverse and representative sample of non-theists than Hunsberger and Altemeyer in terms of age, city and country of residence, and activity level in atheist and humanist organizations. Of the 2,415 participants who answered the questions on organizational participation, for example, only 735, just over 30%, were members of a “real-world” atheist/humanist organization in the manner of Hunsberger and Altemeyer’s participants. Further, fewer than half of my participants answered that they were members of online atheist/humanist communities.

The survey was available online from February 2008 to August of 2008 and a total of 3,062 individuals started the survey, with 2,136 completing the entire initial set of questions. As I engaged in my fieldwork and continued reading, I formulated additional questions. Given that I had asked participants to include their email address on the original survey if they were comfortable, I sent this smaller group of participants a link to this second set of questions.<sup>10</sup>

Besides surveying non-theists, I also conducted an online survey for theists of a variety of religious backgrounds. This survey served two purposes. First, the survey allowed me to obtain data pertaining to levels of explicit belief in various supernatural

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<sup>9</sup> The field contacts who allowed me to email their members and mailing lists were mostly organizers or members of the atheist and humanist organizations in which I conducted participant observation. These included the Rationalist Association of St. Louis, the St. Louis Area Atheist Meetup Group, East Bay Atheists, San Francisco Bay Atheists, Palo Alto Humanist Community, Norwegian Humanist Association, Copenhagen Atheist Meetup Group, Danish Atheist Society, UK Brights Bulletin, and the British Humanist Association, among others. The websites included the following groups on the social networking site Facebook: Atheist, Agnostic, and Nonreligious; Agnostic in Theory, Atheist in Practice; Libertarian Atheists; If I Weren’t an Atheist, I’d Think that Richard Dawkins was God; Government + Religion= Disaster. On Myspace, I advertised on the Atheist and Agnostic Group III. With the assistance of the moderator of the Myspace group, I was also able to advertise on the James Randi Educational Foundation discussion board.

<sup>10</sup> The entire surveys for non-theists can be found in Appendix A.

concepts, theistic intuitions, moral convictions, and exposure to displays of religious commitment with which to compare the data from the non-theist sample. Such comparisons allow us to better address questions concerning the role of particular variables in explaining belief in supernatural agents and theistic intuitions. Secondly, theists' understanding of and attitudes towards non-theists are important elements to bear in mind when attempting to understand non-theism in particular countries.

I recruited theists for this survey in a manner similar to my recruitment of non-theists for their survey, both online and through field contacts. I contacted the administrators for organizations on both Facebook (1,000,000 Xns Worship God, I Bet I Can Find 1,000,000 Christians, I'm a Christian and I'm Proud to Say It, A Lil Islam Everyday Helps Keep Shaitan Away, Ask a Muslim, 6,000,000 Jews, and Paganism and Wicca) and Myspace (Myspace Jews, Islam, and Wiccans of the World). These organizers allowed me to post messages to their groups' discussion boards advertising my research and providing a link to the survey.

I also utilized my field contacts among Christian churches in the United States to advertise the survey. I was able to recruit participants from two small, sexually-segregated Bible study groups in Southern Illinois as well as the eldest members of a Baptist youth group from a church in central Missouri. The initial survey for theists had 137 participants, with 98 completing the survey. The follow-up survey with the same additional questions asked in the non-theist follow up surveys managed 25 participants, with 20 completing it.

The results of the survey for theists are clearly in no way representative of theists in Western countries, and 76 of the 96 individuals who answered the question regarding

their country of citizenship answered either the United States or Canada. Yet, this survey did allow me to obtain more data on theistic views of non-theists than I would have been able to obtain otherwise. It also allowed me to gather data on theoretically important variables of comparison such as theistic intuitions and exposure to commitment displays while using the same methods of data gathering as my non-theistic sample, both online and in person.<sup>11</sup>

The surveys described above allow me to access more detailed information about the views and activities of non-theists from a variety of backgrounds than the nationally representative but shallow questions asked as part of the WVS. The amount of detailed and contextual information obtained through surveys, however, is always limited.

In order to access the contextual and qualitative information about how different non-theists view themselves, their history, and members of variety of religions, how certain words and concepts (including those used in my surveys) are being used in spoken and written discourse, I needed to engage in participant observation among non-theists. Insights from such fieldwork are valuable for both qualitative and quantitative accounts, as besides coming to better understand the language, practices, and viewpoints of many non-theists, such experiences allow one to better judge how particular words or concepts will be interpreted when placed in more quantitative instruments such as surveys. It is likely, for instance, that Hunsberger and Altemeyer would have chosen different words in their questions on atheism, as many atheists rejected their definitions of “atheism” and ended their participation in the survey.

I conducted ten months of participant observation among atheist and humanist groups, as well as non-affiliated atheists and humanists, in the US, UK, and Denmark. I

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<sup>11</sup> The surveys for theists can be found in Appendix B.

spent five months in the United States, where I stayed mostly in St. Louis, Missouri, a mid-size Midwestern city, with ten day visits to New York City and the San Francisco Bay Area as well as a weekend trip to the American Atheist annual convention in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

While in the St. Louis area from December 2007 to April 2008, I attended ten meetings of the Rationalist Society of St. Louis, which, founded in 1948, is one of the oldest such organizations in the country, and also followed the conversations on the very active email list-service that the organization maintains. I also attended six meetings of the more informal and much younger (both in terms of the founding of the organization and the average age of its members) St. Louis Area Atheist Meetup group, as well as two Sunday services of the Ethical Society of St. Louis. While in New York City, I attended one meeting of the New York City Atheists organization, as well as one meeting of the Harlem chapter of the Center for Inquiry, one of the few atheist-humanist organizations with a primarily African American membership. In the San Francisco Bay Area, I attended one meeting of the East Bay Atheists organization in Berkeley, one meeting of the San Francisco Bay Atheists, and one meeting of the Palo Alto Humanist Community. I was also present for the entire American Atheist Convention at the Marriot hotel and conference centre in Minneapolis Minnesota in late March, 2008, an annual event that, on this occasion, had between six hundred and seven hundred attendees.<sup>12</sup>

While in the United Kingdom from April to July 2008, I attended seven meetings of the Oxford Humanists, as well as the first meetings of the Oxford University Atheist Society and four meetings of the Oxford University Secular Society. In addition, I attended four meetings of the Central London Humanist Group, an organization

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<sup>12</sup> Further background and detail on these various organizations can be found in chapter eight.

emphasizing socializing and occasional lectures, and four meetings of the London Atheist Meetup Group, a group emphasizing more focused and often contentious discussion.

While in Denmark, I attended two monthly meetings of the Copenhagen Atheist Meetup Group, which, surprisingly at first, was composed mostly of American expatriates living in Copenhagen. In addition, I met with one of the organizers of the national level Danish Atheist Society (*Ateistisk Selskab*), a much larger organization but one that does not hold general meetings, and had numerous casual encounters with non-theistic Danes, many more than I had in the United States or the United Kingdom. This is perhaps unsurprising given the fact that, depending on the survey question asked, Denmark's population is 43-80% non-theist while the United Kingdom's is 31-44% non-theist and the United States is 3-9% non-theist (Zuckerman 2007).

Besides travelling physically to these different locations in order to interact with non-theists, I also spent an estimated 450 hours online over the course of my ten months of fieldwork viewing and occasionally participating in websites and discussion boards devoted to atheism and humanism. The sites I visited most frequently were Richard Dawkins' site ([richarddawkins.net](http://richarddawkins.net)), the biologist P.Z. Myers blog ([scienceblogs.com/pharyngula](http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula)), [friendlyatheist.com](http://friendlyatheist.com), the Atheist Media Blog at [atheistmedia.com](http://atheistmedia.com), Austin Cline's atheism blog on [about.com](http://about.com), the Atheist, Agnostic, and Non-Religious Facebook group and the Atheist & Agnostics III Myspace group. Given that non-theists do not live in specifically non-theistic communities and do not have the opportunity to interact in person on a daily basis, these websites and discussion boards provide a convenient way for non-theists to receive news, comment, and interact, as well as an opportunity for me to observe and participate in this form of sociality.

There were two primary reasons why I chose to conduct multi-sited fieldwork as opposed to the more traditional single-sited model that allows for more intensive immersion and, consequently, more nuanced and detailed information. The first reason is largely a matter of practicality; there are no specifically non-theist communities that involve daily, face to face interaction in which to conduct long term ethnographic fieldwork. Rather, there are a multitude of organizations, some online and some offline, some focusing more on socializing with like-minded individuals and some focused more on debating questions of philosophy and social activism, some meeting once a week and some meeting only every few months. The second reason is that given my goal of describing non-theism in the West, my goal of helping better explain the sociological data that points to the importance of national level variables such as state welfare spending and existential security, and the fact that my survey data come from non-theists from over fifty countries, multi-sited fieldwork becomes a necessity. Consequently, in order to better generalize about non-theism in the West, experience everyday life in Western countries with varying degrees of state welfare spending and existential security, and obtain qualitative contextual information about the locations in which the majority of my survey participants live, I chose to engage in multi-sited fieldwork.<sup>13</sup>

While surveys for non-theists provide a wealth of data for testing a variety of hypotheses and my multi-sited fieldwork provides more detailed contextual information to better interpret and understand the survey results, and non-theism more generally, I

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<sup>13</sup> Given that I was mainly concerned with non-theism, my fieldwork experiences amongst theists were minimal. I lived with a politically and religiously conservative family while in the United States and also attended a single meeting of an all-female Bible study group in Southern Illinois. These experiences, as well as around a dozen conversations with theists about non-theism and my research, my attendance at one sermon in Oxford specifically on the Christian response to atheism, and my viewing of numerous online discussions of non-theism by theists constituted the entirety of my fieldwork among theists.

still found myself with many questions during my research, from questions about what I had witnessed at an atheist or humanist meeting to questions about how participants were interpreting and answering the survey questions. To address such questions, I also conducted structured and unstructured interviews with dozens of non-theists as well as the organizers of several atheist and humanist organizations.

I interviewed organizers of five different atheist organizations, the Rationalist Society of St. Louis, New York City Atheists, Center for Inquiry, Harlem, the Oxford University Atheist Society, and the Danish Atheist Society. These unstructured interviews normally consisted of basic questions about the organizations themselves, such as how long they have existed, frequency of meetings, normal attendance figures, and whether or not they engage in any anti-religious or pro-secular activism, as well as how they see their role in their communities and society as a whole.

I also interviewed thirty-six individual non-theists, eighteen in the United States, thirteen in the United Kingdom, and five in Denmark. These were semi-structured interviews in which I asked all of the questions from my first survey for non-theists. In these face-to-face and telephone interviews, however, I was able to further clarify questions from participants about the questions themselves as well as ask follow up questions based on their answers. These interviews allowed me to better understand how the wording of the survey questions was being received by participants (in general and from particular countries) as well as obtain more extended and detailed responses, as participants tended to give longer, more detailed answers to open-ended questions when being interviewed than when taking the survey online. As a result, I was able to get a

fuller sense of these individuals' beliefs, moral convictions, backgrounds, and opinions on atheism, humanism, and different religions.

Besides these scheduled interviews, I was also able to speak with dozens of individuals in each country, theists and non-theists alike, through everyday discussions about myself and my work. I found that most people I spoke with in the US, UK, and Denmark had some interest or opinion concerning the topics of religion, atheism, and secularism, and many felt comfortable enough to either ask questions about my experiences in other countries or offer their own opinions and theories of religion and non-theism. All of the interviews and conversations helped me to better understand the nuances and national differences in views of non-theism, atheism, agnosticism, and specific religions such as Christianity and Islam.

Having employed multiple methods in multiple locales allows me to present a more accurate and detailed account of the beliefs, moral judgments, coalitional commitments and self-concepts of non-theists in Western countries. Moreover, by connecting this account to the theoretical literature in both the social and cognitive sciences, I seek to come to an improved account of both non-theism and strong atheism.

## Findings

The individual chapters of this thesis are the results of my attempting to answer the questions presented earlier concerning non-theism and strong atheism through the methods outlined above, with five chapters devoted to offering a new account of belief and non-belief in the existence of supernatural agents and, thus, a new account of religion

and secularization, and three chapters devoted to describing and explaining patterns in strong atheist moral sentiment and activity.

Chapter one will present evidence from my fieldwork and online surveys relating to the beliefs that non-theists hold concerning supernatural agents. It will show that, for a very large, though not fully representative, sample of Western non-theists, lack of belief in the existence of the Judaeo-Christian God is accompanied by a lack of belief in other supernatural agents such as ghosts and even vaguely defined notions such as “some higher power.” Further, evidence will be presented suggesting that, for a large number of non-theists, though not all, the lack of explicit belief is accompanied by a lack of theistic intuitions, including intuitively viewing misfortune as punishment, good fortune as reward, and random events as signs. Moreover, evidence will be presented suggesting that the degree to which one explicitly believes in supernatural phenomena is significantly and positively correlated with the occurrence of such intuitions.

Chapter two will help set the stage for an examination of theism and non-theism by defending the philosophical and scientific credibility of a science of belief. “Belief” as a scientific concept has been criticized by many anthropologists, psychologists, and philosophers. The main criticisms of “belief” are that beliefs are unobservable, that they do not exist, and that the word ‘belief’ is a Western construct unsuitable for comparative use. All of these criticisms may seem to render a “science of belief” naïve and mistaken. Utilizing the work of the cognitive sciences, and the philosophical view of functionalism that underlies them, I will offer a minimal definition of belief that will allow for a science of theism and non-theism.

Chapter three will review explanatory accounts of religious beliefs. It will evaluate both historical and contemporary explanations for why human beings, throughout time and across the globe, have believed in the existence of supernatural agents, paying particular attention to the cognitive science of religion (CSR). It will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of CSR in the effort to explain supernatural agent beliefs and will outline how recent work by evolutionary anthropologist Joe Henrich on the role of credibility enhancing displays (CREDS) in producing supernatural agent beliefs can help shore up existing weaknesses in cognitive accounts of religious beliefs. It will make this case through a review of the relevant theoretical and empirical literature and the results of my fieldwork and online survey.

Chapter four will utilize the account of religious belief outlined in chapter three in order to evaluate the few existing explanations of non-theism and will go on to present a new account of non-theism centered on the role of CREDS. In short, it will argue that non-theism is the result of a lack of sufficient exposure to CREDS pertaining to representations of supernatural agents.

Chapter five presents an alternative account of non-theism to that of Norris and Inglehart, based on the psychological dynamics identified in chapters three and four. That is, it will attempt to explain the data presented by Norris and Inglehart regarding the role of existential security in producing larger populations of non-theists within a country in a way consistent with the findings of the cognitive sciences. It will review literature from anthropology, psychology, and sociology on the effects of threatening stimuli on commitment to ingroup ideologies, including religious ideologies, on joining and participating in religious groups, and performing “superstitious” actions. It will note that

all three of these effects constitute CREDs for supernatural agent beliefs, thus allowing for the effective transmission of religious beliefs in environments with sufficient levels of threatening stimuli. In environments where threats have been greatly diminished, such as the Scandinavian welfare states, these CREDs diminish and, consequently, non-theism becomes much more common.

The chapter will also explore the category of “normative threat,” as outlined by the political scientist Karen Stenner (2005), as an improved explanation for why the United States is so much more religious than nations such as Sweden and Denmark despite resembling them economically. The United States, despite its economic wealth, has long been a nation saturated with “normative threat,” that is threats to “common authority” and “shared values,” as its social and ethnic diversity and the frequent competition between these groups for access to power and resources have continually worked to increase commitment to ingroup ideologies, most of which involve religious representations. Consequently, the amount of CREDs has stayed high in the United States even as it has become a world superpower. The Scandinavian countries since the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, by contrast, have possessed a remarkable degree of ethnic and social homogeneity. Consequently, when economic prosperity and social welfare swept these countries in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, both existential and normative threats were minimized, leading to few CREDs of religious beliefs and, in the span of two to three decades, a dramatic drop in theism.

Chapter six moves the discussion from non-theism to strong atheism. It will describe strong atheism, referencing both fieldwork and survey data, as consisting of two normative claims. The first claim is that religious beliefs and practices are harmful, and

thus, immoral. The second normative claim is that there is a more virtuous way of establishing one's personal beliefs and that this virtuous way is to limited one's own beliefs to what can be supported by the current findings of the sciences. Chapter seven will go on to offer an account of the origins of these normative sentiments in relation to research on moral psychology, anthropology, and history, making extensive use of social psychologist Jonathan Haidt's theory of five moral foundations producing a plethora of diverse socio-cultural virtues (Haidt and Joseph 2007).

The final chapter, chapter eight, describes the development of organized atheism and humanism in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Denmark, noting the important distinction, first made by sociologist Colin Campbell, between "substitutionalist" groups, who seek to keep religious communities but with non-theistic belief systems, and "abolitionist" groups, who seek to protest and combat religious beliefs in both the public and private spheres (Campbell 1971). The chapter then presents both historical and contemporary evidence that strong atheist sentiments and activity are correlated with the degree to which religious beliefs and identities are present in the public sphere in a given country and suggests that this relationship may be explicable in terms of normative threat.

## Part I. NON-THEISM

## Chapter 1. What Non-theists “Believe”

According to large scale social surveys conducted over the last several decades (Norris and Inglehart 2004, Zuckerman 2007), as well as field research by sociologists of religion (Zuckerman 2008), significant differences exist between nations in levels of religious belief and participation and many nations have exhibited strong declines in religious belief and participation over the last fifty years, most notably Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands. Moreover, as discussed in the introduction, Norris and Inglehart, as well as Gill and Lundsgaarde (2005), have found that levels of religious belief and participation in a nation negatively correlate with levels of human security and state welfare spending, while rational choice theorists such as Rodney Stark (1999) continue to argue in the face of mounting evidence (Chaves and Gorski 2001) that such national differences are better explained as the result of differences in the quality of the religious product available.

Both scholars and activists formulate theories for the decline of religious belief in these countries, from Christians arguing that the growth in unbelief is simply the result of increased selfishness and immorality to strong atheists arguing that it is simply the result of better education and critical thinking to sociologists discussing the impact of “existential security” on belief in God. Numerous questions remain, however, concerning both the meaning and utility of the term “belief” and the shallow methodology of large scale social surveys concerned with belief. First, given the different meanings of the terms “belief” and “believe,” can we be confident that we are seeing a drop in the numbers of people who believe in the existence of the supernatural agent, “God,” rather than merely those who have lost faith that this God is working properly on their behalf? Secondly, what type of variable is belief? Numerous large-

scale social surveys keep belief a dichotomous (Do you believe? Yes or No) or trichotomous matter (Do you believe? Yes, No, or I Don't Know), while some commentators (Dawkins 2006) argue that belief lies on a continuum from absolutely certain belief to an absolutely certain denial. Thirdly, how do those who lack belief in God or the supernatural label themselves and do these labels indicate different levels of belief when belief is conceived of continuously? Fourthly, most surveys only ask about "God," raising the question of whether or not these results really indicate a decline in supernatural agent beliefs or only the rejection of a particular supernatural agent of particular religious traditions.

Besides these basic questions, some have raised the issue of whether or not a decline in religious belief is really possible. Some cognitive scientists, for instance, may argue that while many people in certain countries no longer possess explicit beliefs in the existence of supernatural agents such as God, their unconscious beliefs and intuitions are not so secular. They raise the question of different types of beliefs and whether or not implicit beliefs in the existence of the supernatural can ever truly be absent.

Such questions, I argue, must be addressed before addressing the causality behind religious beliefs and any perceived secularization in the data provided by sociologists of religion.

### The Meanings of "Belief"

One of the most important questions I attempt to address in this thesis is why we find the distribution of professions of supernatural agent beliefs that we do; why do individuals in Scandinavian countries, for instance, exhibit such low levels of belief and religious

practice while the individuals in the United States, on average, exhibit much higher levels. In my attempt to address this question, I routinely utilize the terms “belief” and “believe,” both as theoretical entities and as important terms for my conversations with participants. Using the term “belief” is not, however, a simple and uncomplicated matter, as the term’s different meanings, including both “believe that” and “believe in” must be considered when formulating theories and conducting fieldwork. Specifically for my own work, I must be wary of formulating theories utilizing one meaning of the term and receiving information from participants regarding the other. Despite these complications, I will argue that I have been able to gather data relevant to answering my theoretical questions about factors affecting supernatural agent beliefs.<sup>14</sup>

Several social anthropologists, for instance, have commented on the difficulties of employing the word “belief” when conducting fieldwork among and speaking about a variety of religions. Evans-Pritchard found the word “belief” to be of little use in analyzing Nuer religion, as he could find no word in the Nuer language that came close to matching the term’s various connotations (1956). Rodney Needham, in what is probably the most comprehensive treatment of the notion of belief by an anthropologist (1972), discusses the moment when he realized that he was unable to devise a way to say “I believe in God” in the Penan language and, further, that he could not state with any justification what psychic attitude members of the Penan have towards *Peselong*, a Penan deity similar to the Western idea of God.

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<sup>14</sup> In this section, I defend the use of the term “belief” in coming to understand the thoughts of non-theists in the West, as they utilize and normally understand the term to mean taking something to be true. Yet, another significant criticism of the term “belief” by Needham, Pouillon, and Ruel is that “belief” is not a natural kind but rather a socially-constructed concept. If this is the case, then a science of belief is a naïve and foolhardy enterprise. This particular criticism will be dealt with in detail in Chapter 2, before my discussion of the science of religious beliefs in Chapters 3 and 4.

Moreover, scholars of indigenous religions have pointed out that ritual participation, as opposed to any type of doctrinal adherence, is frequently of central importance in establishing an individual's identity as a member of a specific religious coalition (Harvey, 2000; Johnson, 2002; Whitehouse 2000). Paul C. Johnson, for instance, relates that during his fieldwork among practitioners of *Candomblé* in Brazil, he hesitated during his initiation when asked to take on a key drumming role because of his lack of belief in the existence of the *orishas*. He confessed his lack of belief to the *mae-de-santo* presiding over the ritual, only to be met by a bewildered stare; she asked him not what he did or did not believe, but simply whether or not he was going to participate in the ritual, demonstrating the lack of importance of personal beliefs regarding the *orishas* and the strong importance of ritual practice within the community (personal communication).

Discussions of the perils of utilizing the word "belief" in describing religious states of mind or community dynamics are not offered *ex nihilo*. Rather, they are cautionary tales about utilizing the language and assumptions that Western scholars employ when discussing the major religious traditions in their own societies, normally Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, in attempting to understand other religions and societies (Pouillon, 1982). As Needham relates in his lexical and ideational history of the term, the word "belief" has acquired numerous connotations over the centuries in the West, from the influences of Hebrew vocabulary to the dynamics of the Protestant Reformation, that are still prominent in contemporary usage (1972). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that I found the term "belief" to be both frequently employed and of great importance in my

fieldwork amongst self-identifying atheists, agnostics, and humanists in Western countries.

During my time speaking with non-theists and attending various meetings of atheist-humanist groups in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Denmark, as well as conducting a large online survey, I have found it quite easy to elicit discussion on what non-theists do and do not believe about the existence of supernatural agents and about the positive, negative, or neutral influence of religion in the world. The term “belief” is frequently employed in such discussions, whether prompted through my use of the term in my questions or not. In my internet survey, for instance, I asked self-identified atheists to offer their own definitions of the term “atheism.” Of the 1389 self-identified atheists, 1137 used the words “belief” or “believe” in their definition of atheism. The responses varied widely, from the *positive atheism* that asserts that no God or gods exist (Martin, 2007): “Atheism is a belief that no God or gods exist;” “A belief that nothing exists beyond the natural world;” “A belief that there is no god, supernatural or spirit,” to the *negative atheism* which merely entails the lack or absence of such a belief: “lack of belief in gods or any supernatural beings;” “Lack of belief in God;” “the absence of belief in the existence of any higher power.”

Numerous responses, both online and in my face-to-face conversations, as well as the dozens of meetings I attended in different countries, demonstrated to me that a significant portion of non-theists have thought through not only their position on the non-existence of supernatural agency but also the definitions and concepts they use to articulate and defend this position. One of the most common debates amongst non-theists, for example, whether it is face to face at a local atheist or rationalist society or

electronically via one of the plethora of online discussion forums devoted to atheism, is whether positive or negative atheism, as defined above, should be taken as the standard meaning of the more general term, “atheism.” While it is certainly the case that dictionaries and common parlance hold “atheism” to designate a belief that no God or gods exist, many self-identified atheists reject this characterization, seeing atheism as a lack of belief, while others would label such negative atheism as agnosticism in the sense that one is not ruling out the possibility of the existence of some supernatural agency.

Similarly, self-identified agnostics debate amongst themselves and with self-identified atheists over the precise meaning of agnosticism and whether or not it is a more “rational” or responsible position to hold than atheism. In the span of a week, for example, I heard new attendees of the St. Louis Area Atheist Meetup Group passionately debating whether agnosticism is a more prudent position, given that one cannot be absolutely certain that God or gods do not exist and also witnessed long-time members of the Rationalist Society of St. Louis, an agnostic who had been a member for 5 years and someone who rejects such labels who had been a member for 28 years, merely acknowledging the differences with a nod and a smile as the topic came up, as they had rehearsed the arguments dozens of times in the past and were quite familiar with each others views.

Such debates reveal not only that the language of “belief” is widespread in the discourse of self-identified atheists, agnostics, and humanists, but that, for non-theists in the West, beliefs, whether held or lacked, are important to one’s identity. Further evidence of this importance can be seen in the reactions of some self-identified atheists in the United States who, while attending the annual Atheist Alliance International

conference in early 2009, asked a Christian reporter, who had said that she did not know if she was an atheist or not after confessing that she worked for “a small Canadian magazine focused on social justice, ethics, and lifestyle,” “Well if you aren’t an atheist, then what are you?” (Bell 2009). While, because of my own non-theism, I was quickly able to move beyond such confrontations in face to face meetings or at conventions, I did encounter many similar instances during my online research. Several of the survey questions asked about a move away from religious belief, making the assumption that survey takers had once been theists and several survey takers responded on online message boards that such questions might well reveal my theistic assumptions regarding atheism and possibly my status as a theist attempting to understand atheists for the purposes of converting them.

The prominence of the term “belief,” as well as its important role as a badge of identity amongst non-theists is by no means unique in the modern West, as the language of “belief” and its important role in personal and social identity is widely acknowledged and is commonly seen as a result of the Protestant Reformation (Smith 1998). Utilizing the word “belief,” then, and asking non-theists about their beliefs or lack of would seem to be unproblematic. Yet, even in the West, where the language of belief is most familiar and utilized, the term is not without ambiguity and polysemy. Needham, Pouillon, and others outline the varied meanings of the verb “to believe,” noting that besides its most frequent meaning of holding some proposition or state of affairs to be the case, the word is also used to express a highly emotional commitment or trust in a person or an idea, usually designated by “believe in” rather than “believe that.”

While the “belief in” meaning of “belief” is utilized less frequently by non-theists, it is by no means absent in their discourse. Several atheists and humanists, both in the United States and the United Kingdom, for instance, complained to me that they frequently face the question, “*Well, if you don’t believe in God, what do you believe in?*” The implication of the question is not that a lack of belief in God entails a lack of belief in the existence of other phenomena (though it is sometimes equated with not believing in the existence of an objective morality), but rather that without an emotional loyalty and adherence to something “larger than yourself,” you are somehow adrift.

I frequently heard, “We believe in freedom and democracy,” and even occasionally, “I believe in the separation of church and state.” Such a commitment to and trust in abstract ideas is sometimes called the “positive” side of atheism and humanism, as opposed to the “negative” side of arguing against the existence of the supernatural, and is emphasized most heavily amongst self-identified humanists in both print and in person within the United States and the United Kingdom. On the British Humanist Website, for instance, a page devoted to explaining humanism has as its second heading, “What humanists believe” and states that humanists “believe in individual rights and freedoms, but believe that individual responsibility, social cooperation and mutual respect are just as important” as well as that “humanists are positive, gaining inspiration from our lives, art and culture, and a rich natural world.”

Despite the varied meanings of the word “belief” and the connotations with which some non-theists concern themselves, I found that discussions of belief amongst non-theists, whether in meetings, in interviews, in print, or on online forums, mostly concerned “belief” in its minimal sense of holding something to be true or false with little

to no implied connotations of conviction, loyalty, and love. As opposed to Needham amongst the Penan or Evans-Pritchard amongst the Nuer, then, I felt perfectly at ease in discussing belief with non-theists in the West. This is quite fortunate, as whether or not, and the degree to which a person believes in the existence of supernatural agents is one of the most important phenomena that I am investigating in the context of secularization and the cognitive science of religion. Eliciting data concerning people's beliefs or lack thereof, would not be a problem, at least in terms of the vocabulary and concepts used to access these data.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, my field experiences demonstrated to me that amongst most non-theists, the word "belief," when placed in statements and questions concerning the existence of some supernatural agent or force, is normally interpreted as belief in the sense of holding something to be true rather than having a strong emotional attachment and loyalty to an idea. I found little reason, then, to doubt that the results of the large scale social surveys reviewed by Zuckerman (2007) and Norris and Inglehart (2004) reflect a decline in the proportion of individuals in numerous countries who find the existence of God to be credible, rather than merely a decline in the proportion of individuals who have a devotion, loyalty, and "faith" in the idea of God.

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<sup>15</sup> There remains, of course, the problem of reluctance, as many people are hesitant to discuss their views on religion and the supernatural, in many cases because of the sensitive social nature of the topic and their concerns over their beliefs becoming widely known or their opinion that such questions should not even be asked. I found the former more common in the United States, as many people I talked to had many religious friends and family members, and the latter more common in Scandinavia, where such matters are commonly viewed as very personal and not suitable for discussion.

## Is Belief a Continuous Variable and do Different Categories of Non-theists Vary on this Continuum?

Key questions immediately present themselves in the process of investigating what people believe regarding the existence of supernatural agencies or processes, such as God, ghosts, and the afterlife; what type of answer is most likely to be offered and what type of answer is most likely to be useful in testing particular hypotheses? If one were to only be exposed to atheist and humanist discourse for a short period of time, one may well come away with the impression that belief is a dichotomous matter; either you believe in the existence of supernatural agents or you do not, as agnosticism, sometimes seen as a middle ground, would still constitute a lack of belief. *We, those who do not believe, meet together and discuss the issues of living in a society where most people do believe, or where those who believe have what we see as too much political power.* Yet, upon more sustained exposure to atheist and humanist discourse, whether in meetings, interviews, or even reading bestsellers such as Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, Sam Harris' *The End of Faith*, or John Humphrys' *In God We Doubt*, it became clear to me that alongside this dichotomous, us and them approach to belief, there also exists a more subtle debate about degrees of possibility and the nature of certainty. In *The God Delusion*, for example, Dawkins outlines 7 positions on a continuum concerning the existence of God, from an absolutely certain theist (Position 1) to the pure middle ground of a perfect agnostic who sees the possibility of the existence of God at exactly 50% (Position 4) to the absolutely certain atheist (Position 7) and places himself at position 6 but leaning towards position 7 (Dawkins 2006, 50-51).

While few of the non-theists I spoke with were as precise as Dawkins in formulating a scale, many did place their belief or lack of on a continuum in discussions

of the merits of atheism vs. agnosticism, arguing over whether or not it was legitimate to claim that there was 0% chance of some sort of God (usually deistic, as fully traditional theistic gods were nearly universally denied) existing, or if there was some small but mostly insignificant chance, or even a fairly significant chance. Vicky from San Francisco, for instance, in an interview said, “Well, I don’t believe in anything supernatural, but I guess anything’s possible....you do hear these stories,” while several of my interviewees, when asked what the likelihood was of the existence of a theistic God or ghosts, answered with an emphatic “No chance, 0%.”

Merely asking non-theists whether or not they believe in the existence of various supernatural agents, concepts, or processes, then, is likely to cover up the variance that exists amongst non-theists regarding probabilities. This is not merely a problem for accurate description of the views of non-theists, as we may be able to establish whether or not there are significant differences in levels of belief between self-identified atheists and agnostics and other groups, but is also a problem in the attempt to test hypotheses concerning the effects of different factors on belief in the supernatural, as the more variance we can measure, the easier it will be to see whether or not a particular factor is affecting belief.

In order to better describe the variance amongst non-theists in levels of belief in the existence of supernatural agencies, as well as obtain the most detailed measure of the dependent variable (self-reported belief) for purposes of testing hypotheses about the effects of certain variables on supernatural beliefs, I asked my questions about beliefs in terms of probabilities. I asked my participants, both non-theist and theist: “In your mind, what is the likelihood that the following exist? For example, if you are not certain that

there is no afterlife but find it highly improbable, you might list 1% for the afterlife item.

Similarly, if you have never visited the pyramids of Egypt but for the most part trust books, media, and other people, you might list 99% for the pyramids of Egypt.”

I then presented the following list of items, always in randomized order:<sup>16</sup>

- TRADITIONAL GOD (an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good creator and moral enforcer)
- DEISTIC GOD (a divine architect of the universe who does not interfere in human affairs)
- SOME HIGHER POWER
- GHOSTS
- KARMA (a cosmic balancing scale that results in good actions being rewarded and bad actions being punished)
- THE AFTERLIFE
- SOULS
- EVOLUTION BY NATURAL SELECTION
- CANCER
- ALIENS (humanoid being with intelligence similar or superior to human intelligence)
- GLOBAL WARMING (human activity is causing the temperature of the atmosphere to increase)
- THE PYRAMIDS OF EGYPT

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<sup>16</sup> Randomizing the order of presentation helps prevent order effects in the results, that is, it eliminates the effects that being asked to answer a particular question, such as the traditional god item, prior to some other question, such as the some higher power item, may have on a person’s answer to the second item. In this case it may be possible that a non-theist, after answering that there is a 0% chance of a theistic god existing, is more likely to assign a lower likelihood to the existence of some higher power than he or she would have if the some higher power item were presented first. Randomizing the presentation order of the items keeps such tendencies from strongly affecting the data. Further, by including numerous non-supernatural items (sub-atomic particles, the pyramids of Egypt, global warming, aliens, cancer), I sought to eliminate the possibility that being exposed to so many supernatural items in a row would result in all of these items being categorized immediately as “supernatural” and given a certain standard score without being thought about individually. This strategy appears to have been successful, as hundreds of participants cared enough about the aliens and global warming items to further explain their answers or critique my definitions in the comment space I provided just after these items.

-ANGELS

-SUB-ATOMIC PARTICLES

The ease with which most of my participants answered these questions of belief in a continuous, as opposed to a dichotomous, matter, as well as numerous debates and discussions I witnessed between non-theists on just how much credence should be given to particular supernatural ideas lead me to the conclusion that explicit beliefs can fruitfully be measured in a continuous fashion. The resulting data can be used, then, to look for differences between groups in levels of supernatural belief and test hypotheses about what factors may play a role in increasing or decreasing the credibility of supernatural agent concepts.

Participants answered for eight supernatural concepts: traditional god, deistic god, some higher power, ghosts, souls, the afterlife, karma, and angels. For each item, participants were given the following options for how likely they thought it was that the item existed or was true: 0%, 1%, 10%, 20%, 30%, 40%, 50%, 60%, 70%, 80%, 90%, 99%, 100%. This scale allows us to distinguish those who categorically reject the possibility of an item (0%), those who find the existence or truth of an item highly unlikely but will not rule it out, and those who, while not explicitly believing in the existence of an item, actually rate its likelihood of existing closer to 50% than 0%.

Moreover, it allows us to examine the beliefs of self-identified agnostics and determine (albeit within the obtained sample) how common it really is for self-identified agnostics to give answers of 50% as opposed to answers closely resembling those of self-identified atheists. For while in the formulation of the term's creator, Thomas Huxley, agnosticism is more concerned with whether or not humanity can have any knowledge

about the supernatural than in its probability, Westerners use the term to designate a variety of positions, from one of mere indifference to viewing the probability of the existence of some supernatural agency as exactly 50%, just as likely to be the case as not the case. Richard Dawkins singles out this latter, equiprobable brand of agnosticism in *The God Delusion* for criticism, arguing that agnostics are in error if they view the fact that the existence of God cannot be disproved as implying that the probability of God's existence is 50% (51).

After obtaining an individual participant's answers on these items, I then add them together to create a score for Total Supernatural Belief (TSB), which can in principle vary from 0 to 700 or 800 (depending on whether or not one sees it as a contradiction to be 100% certain that there is a theistic god and also 100% certain that there is a deistic god). Once each individual has a TSB score, I can then examine not only the average levels of beliefs that different categories of persons have for individual questions but also for supernatural belief more generally.

The results may provide some comfort for Professor Dawkins regarding his concerns about agnosticism. Agnostics, while having a significantly higher TSB score ( $M= 101.58$ ,  $SD=130.37$ ) than self-identified atheists ( $M= 18.36$ ,  $SD= 49.56$ ), ( $t = -1.969$ ,  $df = 211.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ), do not approach an average of 50% on any of the supernatural items. Even on the item "some higher power," which I intentionally left vague in order to allow participants to reveal any inklings of supernatural belief they may have, the average agnostic percentage was 21.8%. Moreover, of 225 self-identified agnostics, 103 of them answered 0% on the traditional god item while only 10 answered 50% or above. Agnostics' answers on the deistic god item were only modestly higher,

with 93 of the 225 participants answering 1% while only 35 of the 225 answered 50% or above. And in the broadest item, some higher power, 81 of 219 agnostics answered 1% while 57 of the 219 answered 50% or above.<sup>17</sup>

These data are in agreement with my experiences with self-identified agnostics, both in face-to-face interviews and in organizational meetings in that self-identified agnostics, at least amongst those participating in some group activity, whether in first-world organizations or online, by no means grant equal probability to the notions that there *is* and *is not* a God. Cindy, a self-identified agnostic who participates in both an Ethical Society and a Rationalist Society in St. Louis, represents many agnostics when she says that she does not “believe in any of the gods or supernatural ideas on offer”, answering many of them with a 0% in response to my questionnaire, but that her agnosticism is mostly a matter of remaining open to the possibility of “something” and not ruling it out, as, in the opinions of many agnostics, atheism does.<sup>18</sup>

### A Rejection of “God” or the Supernatural in General?

Asking about a variety of supernatural concepts, as opposed to merely “God,” allows us to answer a variety of questions about what precisely non-theists in the West believe and do not believe. This is crucial for testing hypotheses regarding the effects of certain variables on belief in supernatural agency, as the large scale survey data leave open the possibility that self-identified atheists, agnostics, and humanists only reject the God of Western monotheism rather than supernatural agency in general. Several dozen

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<sup>17</sup> The average supernatural belief scores, for both individual items and for TSB, can be found in Appendix E.

<sup>18</sup> Many self-identified atheists would, of course, disagree with this division between atheism and agnosticism, defining atheism as a mere lack of belief, very similar to Cindy’s own position, as opposed to an active denial of the existence of various supernatural agents and forces.

Christians I spoke with in Missouri and Illinois argued, for instance, that atheism merely amounts to a wilful rebellion against the Christian God and his moral demands and does not, therefore, necessarily entail the same denials of the existence of ghosts, souls, and the afterlife. In addition, popular news outlets in the United Kingdom often report that more UK residents believe in the existence of ghosts and aliens than believe in the existence of God (*Daily Mail* Nov. 24<sup>th</sup>, 2008). It is an interesting question, then, the extent to which self-identified atheists, agnostics, and humanists give credence to the existence of ghosts, angels, and god concepts different from the traditional theistic god of the Western monotheistic traditions, such as the notion of a deistic god and the intentionally vague “some higher power.”

The data presented above suggest the extent to which self-identified atheists, agnostics, and humanists question not only the existence of a more traditional theistic god, but also other supernatural agent concepts, such as ghosts and angels, and more generic concepts such as the afterlife and the soul. While it is the case that all categories of non-theists surveyed gave lower average credence levels to a traditional god than any other supernatural item, their credence levels on those other items remain quite low as well. Furthermore, my conversations and experiences with non-theists gave me no reason to postulate that these other supernatural concepts were given a low probability of existing because of their association with one particular religious tradition. That is, I noticed nothing that would lead me to conclude that individuals ceased believing in the Judaeo-Christian God and then extended this non-belief to other supernatural agents such as ghosts because they associated all supernatural beliefs with Christianity. For a great many individuals, especially in Scandinavia, Christianity, or any religion, did not have an

important enough status in society to merit such opposition and association. That said, a more systematic investigation of this possibility would be worthwhile.

### The Cessation of Theistic Intuitions?

Most of us are familiar with our explicit, conscious beliefs. We may believe that the economy is in a recession or that one of our friends is more gregarious than another. Yet, as much research in the cognitive sciences has shown, there are a multitude of beliefs guiding our reasoning and behaviour that normally do not reach the level of consciousness, beliefs labelled implicit, nonreflective, or unconscious (Wilson 2002; Chaiken and Trope 1999). Developmental psychologists in particular have produced a large body of work on implicit beliefs by working with pre-linguistic infants, utilizing eye-tracking and facial observation technologies to monitor surprise-reactions and, consequently, to establish what expectations and beliefs infants have about the world (Spelke et al. 1992).

The cognitive psychologist Jesse Bering has recently argued that, while many people may indeed be non-theists at a explicit, reflective level, all of us, as a result of our evolutionary heritage, possess an implicit belief that we have a type of social contract with some generic supernatural agency, such that we are rewarded for moral actions and punished for immoral actions (2005, 2006). While it is the case that several anthropologists and cognitive scientists have provided evidence for the role of a variety of unconscious cognitive mechanisms in the transmission of religious ideas and behaviours (Boyer 2001, Atran 2002, Barrett 2004, Whitehouse 2004, McCauley and

Lawson 2002), Bering is unique in arguing for the existence of a universal, unconscious belief in some supernatural agency.

For Bering, anecdotes from atheists and philosophical materialists about their intuitions sometimes betraying their explicit beliefs, such as when they find themselves asking God what they have done to deserve some specific misfortune or when they interpret a wind chime as a sign from a deceased relative, point to the possibility that belief in some sort of supernatural agency and afterlife is the default cognitive stance towards the world and something that explicit concepts and beliefs (such as atheism) never manage to eradicate. For Bering, this anecdotal evidence is enough to at least investigate the possibility that human beings may have a specific cognitive mechanism dedicated to producing such intuitions. In investigating the possibility of a universal implicit belief in supernatural agency, supernaturally administered justice, and the afterlife, Bering and his collaborators have conducted a small number of empirical studies and have also formulated an evolutionary scenario to account for the existence of such a mechanism.

In one early study, Bering documented individuals claiming to be “extinctivists,” meaning they explicitly believed that the self and individual consciousness cease at death, frequently attributing epistemic and emotional states to the dead; he also documented a much longer response time to questions concerning whether or not the dead character still had epistemic and emotional states than to questions concerning physical states (2002). For Bering, an implicit belief in the continued existence of the self seemed difficult to override, even for these explicit extinctivists.

In another study, Bering and colleagues examined whether or not telling participants of a recent nearby ghost sighting would curb cheating on a competitive task with a monetary prize (2005). Participants were asked to complete a competitive spatial intelligence task on a computer, being told that the person with the highest score would receive \$50 and that, because of a glitch in the software (which was still undergoing modification), the correct answer to the upcoming question would periodically be displayed on the screen in the form of an image of a complicated three dimensional figure. Participants were instructed to press the space bar to clear these correct answers from the screen in order to perform the task honestly. All participants were left alone to complete the task and the intention to cheat was measured by the amount of time the participants left the correct answers on the screen before removing them. The experimenters reasoned that the longer it took a participant to clear the answers from the screen, the greater their intentions to cheat, as attempting to memorize the complex figure would take several seconds. Some participants proceeded directly to the task. A second group was asked to read a statement dedicating the test to J. Paul Kellogg, a recently deceased graduate student who had worked extensively on developing the spatial intelligence task. A third group read the same statement but was also told verbally by the experimenter that J. Paul Kellogg's ghost had been sighted recently in the testing room.

The third group, labelled the "ghost-story" group by the experimenters, took significantly less time to clear the correct answers from the screen when they appeared, averaging just over four seconds, while the control group averaged over seven seconds and the group receiving only the dedication statement averaged nearly six and a half seconds. Hearing about the potential presence of a supernatural agent appears to have

significantly curbed intentions to cheat when participants are left alone. Bering interprets this result as providing evidence that human beings have evolved an implicit belief in the existence of some supernatural agency and that the self has a social contract with this agency such that they fear supernatural punishment when primed with the idea that there may be such an agent in the environment.

In addition to citing such empirical evidence in his arguing for the existence of an implicit belief in supernatural agency and justice, Bering also cites evolutionary logic. With the development of language, humans faced a number of new selection pressures, namely a dramatic increase in the importance of reputation. Before language, there was no way of transmitting information between group members about the actions of individuals, allowing those individuals to engage in and benefit from anti-social, selfish behaviour such as stealing or rape while still retaining the benefits of group membership. With language, however, information about such acts can spread rapidly throughout a population and result in the marginalization, ostracization, or physical punishment of that individual, all of which would have a negative effect on that individual's genetic fitness (Alexander 1987; Frank 1988; Dunbar 1996; McElreath, Clutton-Brock, et al. 2003). Any cognitive mechanism that would help restrain selfish, anti-social behaviour and promote reputation-enhancing behaviour would enjoy a selection advantage in this environment.

Bering argues further that a unique challenge is presented by the fact that, in some cases, an individual mistakenly judges him/herself to be totally alone or alone with a potential victim and is tempted to engage in selfish, potentially reputation-damaging behaviour. Making this mistake can be disastrous because that individual's genetic

fitness would be negatively affected if the act is witnessed and reported to the rest of the social group at all, in the former case, or by someone besides the victim, in the latter. Bering theorizes that the intuitive belief in supernatural agency and justice developed to meet this challenge (2006a; 2006b). If individuals implicitly believe that they are being watched by some supernatural agency and that this agency can cause positive and negative events to occur for them, they are less likely to engage in the selfish, reputation damaging behaviour, even when they otherwise believe themselves to be alone. The genes necessary for building the cognitive machinery that make this belief more likely would enjoy greater success in human populations than genes which do not. Bering hypothesizes that intuitive atheism, then, was gradually eliminated from human cognition as intuitive atheists were consistently at a much higher risk of engaging in behaviours that would seriously affect their reputations in a negative way and thereby decrease their genetic fitness.

Bering's hypothesis, while intriguing, merits further examination rather than acceptance. For while some ethnographic studies lend credence to the hypothesis, including Evans-Pritchard's account of the role of *kwoth* (spirit, God) in monitoring and enforcing morality amongst the Nuer (1956), others, such as Harrison's account of the role of ancestral spirits in inciting homicide in Melanesia (1993), do not. And while Bering's experimental results are suggestive, a variety of factors make them difficult to interpret. Firstly, Bering and his collaborators never establish whether or not their participants explicitly believe in the existence of ghosts. This is problematic in that the participants' refraining from cheating on the task when told of a recent ghost sighting could be the result of their explicit belief in the existence of ghosts rather than Bering's

hypothesized implicit belief in a supernatural social contract. Secondly, social psychologists Azim Shariff and Ara Norenzayan conducted a distinct but similar experimental protocol to examine the role of religious primes on pro-social behaviour and found evidence that while religious primes indeed affected university-aged atheists, they had no significant effect on adult atheists (2007). This result raises the possibility that Bering's findings were affected by the age of his university student participants and that his hypothesis would not necessarily find support if he expanded his participant pool to include adults. And finally, Bering's study was only conducted in the United States, a country saturated with discourses of supernatural punishment of immorality, raising the possibility that constant exposure to these discourses, as opposed to any innate implicit belief, produced his results.<sup>19</sup>

All of the above concerns can and should be addressed through further experimental research, some of which I hope to engage in myself in the future. Yet, even through non-experimental research, such as my participant observation in various atheist and humanist groups and my online survey for large numbers of non-theists, we can gather relevant data for evaluating Bering's hypothesis. Bering states, for example, that much of the inspiration for his thesis of a universal implicit belief in the self's social contract with some supernatural agency comes from his own experiences of what I will call *theistic intuitions*, which he has in spite of his explicit atheism. In one experience, he intuitively interprets his own pain as divine punishment:

One hot summer day several years ago, I lay holed up in a suffocating Fort Lauderdale hospital room—the result of an especially virulent bout of the

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<sup>19</sup> Given the commentaries concerning the amoral status of the supernatural in Japan from commentators such as Benedict (1946), Doi (1973), and Macfarlane (2007), a better test of Bering's hypothesis could be conducted in Japan.

flu. Having nothing but the buzzing of dying flies and the sound of muted television game-show applause to engage my interest, I turned my attention to the doleful lamentations of my elderly roommate, a handsome Navy veteran from World War II with a painfully defunct hip and, I gathered, an even more painful theological crisis on his hands. It seems that he had been yanked from the bedside of his aged wife, and he feared that she'd die without him being there. To make matters worse, he had the sneaking suspicion that his son wanted to jettison him off to a nursing home after her death, away from their cherished house and the beautiful garden they'd cultivated for the last 20 years. "I don't understand why God is doing this," he protested meekly to a sympathetic young nurse. "We've always been good people, my wife and me. What did we do to deserve this?" That's strange, I thought. Didn't I ask the same thing just the other day as I was crawling about on the bathroom floor, expelling bodily fluids that I didn't even know I had in me? Indeed, I could distinctly recall the feverish mantra: "Oh, God, please, no more!" And I'm not particularly religious. Just what was this connection between suffering and God all about, anyway? This observation got me thinking about other existential experiences. (Bering 2006)

And in another he interprets a random event in the environment as a communicative sign from the spirit of his deceased mother, despite his explicit belief that there is no soul to survive death.

I've experienced firsthand this phenomenon of finding supernatural messages in everyday events. The morning after my mother died, my siblings and I were sitting in her living room, emotionally drained and drowned in our grief. Just then, the wind chimes outside my mother's window started to sound. We looked at one another, and I, the family sceptic, knew exactly what was going through everyone's heads: "That's her! She's telling us not to worry!" I knew because I was thinking precisely the same thing. How strange: Although I didn't believe in the afterlife, I still couldn't help but make such automatic inferences about my dead mother's attempts to communicate with me. (Bering 2006)

It was experiences such as these that led Bering to his hypothesis and to test it in the laboratory through several published studies, including the one mentioned above involving the ghost of a dead graduate student. For Bering, these experiences were not

thought to result from his religious upbringing as a child or from his somehow internalizing the widespread discourses concerning supernatural punishment in the United States. He thought that such experiences were near universal, just as likely for explicit non-theists as explicit theists and that he could tap such intuitions through lab based studies.

Yet, one may question the leap from Bering's own experiences to those of non-theists in general. The extent to which these intuitions and momentary experiences are present in the lives of explicit non-theists is not a subject of Bering's investigations, yet it is quite relevant in testing Bering's hypothesis. If such experiences do not appear to be widespread amongst non-theists, for example, and mostly are present in the lives of theists, there is little reason to postulate the existence of a pan-human unconscious belief in the existence of supernatural agency for which researchers should search through experimental protocols.

In order to investigate how widespread such intuitions are amongst non-theists, I asked participants, both in interviews and in my online questionnaire, about the frequency and strength of such intuitions, as well as any particular instances they felt comfortable describing for me. Recognizing that the words "intuition" and "belief" can have a variety of meanings in the context of such questions, I introduced the topic with some examples.

Some atheists and agnostics have reported that even though they do not believe in any supernatural beings or powers, they still periodically have intuitions about supernatural beings/forces being at work. For example, one atheist noted that, while in severe pain at a hospital, he felt himself asking "Why me? I have not harmed anyone," a thought which requires an unconscious belief in a force that punishes immoral behaviours. Likewise, an agnostic noted that, after walking away from a severe car accident, she felt that she must be "meant" for something in this life. The questions below will ask about whether or not you have had such intuitions and how

strong you feel they are. Note that the questions are not asking if you believed and acted upon such intuitions, only if you have had them.

We realize that some of you may be reluctant to disclose that you have had intuitions that are at odds with your beliefs. Likewise, we realize that you might attempt to guess the answers we are looking for. We can only request that you give truthful answers rather than those that you think someone of your beliefs SHOULD give or those that you think we are looking for.<sup>20</sup>

I then asked participants about the frequency, strength, and descriptions of three different types of theistic intuitions, as well as any comments they had about the questions themselves. The first concerned intuitions about misfortune being some form of supernatural punishment. The second concerned intuitions about fortune being some form of supernatural reward or sign of favour. The third and final type concerned intuitions of random events being some form of communicative signal from a supernatural agent.

I asked all participants of the frequency with which they had had such intuitions:

How often, since you have held your current views, have you had the thought “Why me? I’m a good person” when you experience an unfortunate occurrence (e.g. becoming seriously ill, losing a loved one, experiencing failure, losing your job, losing a significant amount of money, having a car accident)

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<sup>20</sup> This second paragraph serves two purposes. The first is to call attention to the problem of social desirability in posing questions to self-identified non-theists. If atheists pride themselves on having no belief in the supernatural and no superstitious thoughts, they will be hesitant to admit any such experiences, especially as they are answering the questions as atheists. By calling attention to this bias, I am encouraging participants to consider the influence of such a bias on their answer. The second purpose is to counter some of the demand effects possibly caused by the question or the survey as a whole. By asking atheists if they ever have any theistic thoughts whatsoever, I am at risk of giving the impression that I am looking for a particular answer to the question (in this case that I really want them to come up with some theistic thoughts). Given that some participants wondered about my intentions in their additional comments section at the end of the survey, this is not an unreasonable concern. By calling attention to these demand characteristic, I am encouraging participants to consider its influence on their answer as well and answer as honestly as possible.

- a) I have this thought every time such an unfortunate event occurs.
- b) I normally have this thought when such an unfortunate event occurs, but not always.
- c) I have this thought around half the times such unfortunate events occur.
- d) I sometimes have this thought when such an unfortunate event occurs, but not often.
- e) I never have this thought when such an unfortunate event occurs.
- f) I have not experienced an unfortunate event since I have held my current views.

If the participant answered a, b, c, or d, I went on to ask them about the strength of such intuitions and to recall, if they felt comfortable doing so, a particular instance of such an intuition.

Q) If you have had such intuitions during/after unfortunate events, please rate their average strength.

- a) Very weak
- b) Moderately weak
- c) Somewhat weak
- d) Somewhat strong
- e) Moderately strong
- f) Very strong

Q) If you have had such an intuition, please describe the situation in which it arose. If you have had many such intuitions, please choose one or two that you feel to be noteworthy.

Of the 2,339 non-theists who answered the question regarding frequency of intuitions pertaining to misfortune and supernatural punishment, 1,157, nearly 50% of the sample, answered that they never have this type of intuition (See figure below). And of the 978 non-theists who both answered a, b, c, or d for the frequency question and also provided an answer for the strength question, 380 of them answered a) Very weak.

Similar frequency and strength results were found for both the fortune as reward or selection and the random events as communicative signs question.<sup>21</sup>

Further, after constructing a variable called *total theistic intuitions* by adding a participant's frequency score (0=Never to 4= Always) to their strength score (1=Very weak to 6= Very strong), total theistic intuitions were found to have a moderate and statistically significant positive correlation with total supernatural belief, as measured by the quantified explicit belief questions asked earlier in the survey ( $r = .415$ ,  $N = 2211$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This relationship between explicit belief and theistic intuitions is also reflected in the significant difference between self-identified atheists and self-identified agnostics in their mean theistic intuitions scores (Atheist  $M = 2.90$ ; Agnostic  $M = 6.25$ ) ( $t = -11.20$ ,  $df = 1528$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This correlation, and the fact that nearly half of the non-theists surveyed report never having such intuitions, points away from the notion that all human beings experience such intuitions as a result of an evolved belief in the existence of a social contract between the self and some type of supernatural agency and toward the notion that at least some of these intuitions are encouraged by one's explicit beliefs about such agencies.

While most individuals provided only minimal answers to the question of under what situation these intuitions arose, such as "Friend dying, car accident, my favorite team losing a game" or "being left by a girlfriend; having a wayward teenage son," some described the intuitions in more detail. A 27 year old non-theistic woman from Trinidad and Tobago who does not reject religious and non-religious labels, for example, related the following:

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<sup>21</sup> These frequencies are represented graphically in Appendix F.

“I remember the last two times I was robbed (a common occurrence in my country), I felt almost like they had gotten the wrong person. I have always tried to understand the factors that lead some to be more likely to commit crimes than others. I have argued with people to show compassion. I have spoken publicly against the death penalty and written articles asking for a holistic way of looking at why our society produces so many violent young black male criminals and why these are the ones who are punished instead of white collar criminals who also cause so much harm. When I was the victim of violent crime myself I felt like "I don't deserve this" even though rationally I knew it was random. I have even explained it to myself like I was being tested (by whom I don't know) to see just how strong my liberal beliefs are.”

A sixty-eight year old American woman who is a member of the Brights<sup>22</sup> organization but also rejects labels having to do with atheism and religion offered this account and explanation:

“I am Human and for the first 50 or so years of my life I was brainwashed in such ideas. So of course my thought sometime slip at such moments! Like now. I am losing my sight and am in pain from Synovial Cysts in my back. I also felt that way when I had my 3rd operation in 1 year. But I was and am sick and weak. I feel that those thoughts show my own personal weakness and I do know better.”

The fact that nearly half of non-theists testify to never having such theistic intuitions and the fact that individual total theistic intuition scores are moderately and significantly correlated with explicit belief in the supernatural do not support the claim that all human beings, as a result of their common evolutionary heritage, possess an implicit belief in the existence of supernatural agency that guides their interpretations of fortune, misfortune, and seemingly random events. Neither do my experiences in

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<sup>22</sup> “The Brights” is a non-theistic organization founded in 2003 by Paul Geisert and Mynga Futrell. The term “bright,” means “an individual whose worldview is naturalistic –free of supernatural and mystical elements” (Brights.net FAQ), and was coined in order to present non-theism in a positive and more socially acceptable way, similarly to the homosexual use of the word “gay.” The term has been championed in the public sphere by philosopher Dan Dennett, but has also been criticized by many for insinuating that non-theists are more intelligent than theists.

Denmark and Sweden, where many non-theists thought such intuitions quite strange, as opposed to many in the US, who disagreed with such thoughts, but expressed more understanding about how one might have such thoughts. One Danish non-theist, for example, a young man whose father is a minister in the Danish national church and who was raised in a liberal religious tradition, listened politely to my questions regarding theistic intuitions as we sat in a Copenhagen park listening to a free concert, yet retained a bemused smile as he continued to tell me how rare he thought it was for Danes, himself included, to have any explicit beliefs or momentary intuitions about the operations of supernatural agents. His smile and his own question to me, “Are these things that common where you come from?” demonstrated clearly for me just how alien some Scandinavians find supernatural agent beliefs, both explicit and implicit.

### Explaining National Differences

The combination of the non-theist responses to questions of their explicit beliefs, the suggestive results of the questions on theistic intuitions, and the corroborating experiences of my fieldwork give us a preliminary view of non-theistic beliefs concerning the existence of supernatural agents and help answer some of the concerns raised by the large scale survey data presented by Zuckerman and Norris and Inglehart.

Despite understanding and even utilizing two meanings of the word “belief,” both “believe that” and “believe in,” non-theists in the West appear to primarily interpret the word “belief” as “belief that” when the term is placed in a statement or question regarding the existence of the Western monotheistic God or any other supernatural agency. This suggests that large scale social surveys such as the World Values Survey

and Gallup polls are normally accessing the thoughts of their participants on the truth or falsity of statements regarding some supernatural agent's existence rather than their devotion to or faith in such an agent and allows for hypothesis testing on the factors that can influence such belief.

Further, non-theism does not appear in these samples to merely be concerned with the rejection of the dominant religious concept, God, in Western culture, but rather appears to be one label for a generalized naturalistic worldview. The vast majority of the thousands of non-theists that participated in this study lack belief in or positively deny the existence of ghosts, souls, karma, and the afterlife nearly to the same extent that they deny the existence of a traditional or deistic god. Self-identified agnostics, sometimes labelled as being somehow midway between atheism and theism, are, from this non-representative but international sample, much closer to atheism than theism, with numerous self-identified agnostics answering 0%-10% on questions pertaining to the likelihood of the existence of some supernatural agent or phenomenon.

One of the most obvious and enduring questions raised by these data is, of course, how to account for both belief in supernatural agents and the absence of such beliefs. What are the causal dynamics that give rise to supernatural agent beliefs in some but not others? How do we explain theism? How do we explain atheism? The cognitive scientist of religion Pascal Boyer offers a sound warning of the perils of becoming overly ambitious in such explanations, noting that as much as we are fascinated by differences between individuals and desire explanations of why one particular person is a theist and another an atheist, such explanations are not on offer from even our best accounts (2001, 318-319). This is because the explanations of religion on offer from a variety of social

and biological sciences are faced with the same limitations as explanations of other behavioural patterns and traits; the explanations concern probabilities and the factors that are likely to make a certain outcome more or less likely, not explanations of a particular individual in all of his or her complexity. The best we can do, as Boyer states, is to explain “trends in groups, which is certainly frustrating” (319).

While Boyer’s warning may seem to bring the effort of explanation to a halt, the fact remains that, regarding theism and non-theism, trends in groups are precisely what we have. Data from the World Values Surveys, as offered by Norris and Inglehart and Gill and Lundsgaarde, data from sociologist Phil Zuckerman’s account of non-theism in Scandinavia (2008), and the results of my own international fieldwork and surveys all point towards the conclusion that societies with higher levels of social welfare spending and “existential security” have lower levels of belief in supernatural agents while societies with lower levels of social welfare spending and existential security have higher levels of belief.

It seems, then, that we do indeed have trends amongst groups in relation to belief in the existence of supernatural agents, trends that can be potentially explained with the tools of the social and cognitive sciences. Yet, we must attend to an important objection to such an enterprise before proceeding to attempt such an explanation.

Above, I defended the use of the word “belief” as an important and valid word in the investigation of non-theism, as the word is known and used by the vast majority of Westerners, theist and non-theist alike, and I would not face the same difficulties discussed by Evans-Pritchard and Rodney Needham in my own research. The fact that nearly all of my participants know and use the word, however, has little bearing on

whether or not the word constitutes a natural kind that science can address. Most Westerners know and use the word “constellation,” yet there can be no real science of constellations, as the concept refers only to superficial and accidental patterns that many of us may perceive from our perspective on Earth but that actually tell us nothing whatsoever about stars, the real natural kind underlying the phenomenon (McCauley 2004). There can be, and is, a vibrant science of the stars. There is not, nor can there be, a science of constellations. Before pursuing an explanation of belief in the existence of supernatural agents and the lack of such beliefs, we must determine whether “belief” is a star or a constellation.

## Chapter 2. In Defence of “Belief”

Before discussing theories of religious belief and its absence, it is important to acknowledge that “belief” is contested. While this is obviously true in the sense that people disagree, in many cases vehemently so, on the truth value of specific religious claims, it is just as true in the sense that many disagree about the appropriateness and utility of the term “belief,” some because they dislike being associated with the term’s connotations, others because they see those connotations as evidence that “beliefs” are much more like constellations than stars, only visible from our own socio-cultural perspective and not a natural kind about which one may legitimately pursue a science.

This was made abundantly clear to me on a chilly January evening as I rode with Karl and Janice of New York City Atheists through the streets of Manhattan. We had met earlier that day at a Centre for Inquiry meeting in Harlem and had then joined that group for a meal before Karl and Janice offered to give me a ride to the vicinity of my temporary lodgings in mid-town. As Karl drove, I briefly outlined my research interests and used the term “non-belief” as a cover term for atheism and agnosticism. While manoeuvring his way through traffic, Karl let me know in no uncertain terms that he did not accept the term “non-belief” as a description of atheism. He argued that the label “non-belief,” when applied to atheists and agnostics, leaves them vulnerable to the old theist charge of “not believing in anything” and therefore having no morals, joys, or commitments. Seeking to pre-empt such charges in debates, Karl protests the use of the terms “non-belief” and “unbelief” in discussing atheism.

And while Karl and Janice both were very much of the opinion that atheists have beliefs, such as believing in freedom, in science, in people, they were also quite clear that

their atheism was not a “belief” in the same sense as a theist’s, referring me to the phrase from their website and newsletters, “Atheism is a conclusion, not a belief.” Their rationale is that belief is a matter of faith and devotion while the position that there is no God is not the result of a leap of faith but rather the result of a process of rational thought and the sound evaluation of available evidence.

Karl and Janice are by no means alone among self-identifying atheists in this viewpoint. Larry Hicock, the coordinator of East Bay Atheists in California, for instance, objected so strongly to the description of atheists as those who “believe God does not exist” in the survey materials of psychologists Bruce Hunsberger and Bob Altemeyer (2006) that he immediately stopped taking their survey as “according to the definition supplied by the survey, I am not an atheist.” Larry argues, “In our culture, the irrational traits [conviction and faith in spite of evidence] best describe a ‘Believer.’ Why, then, should opinions, logical conclusions demanded by evidence, and admittedly subjective taste preferences, be put on the same level as what are most accurately referred to as beliefs, when their essence is that they lack those very qualities most associated with belief (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006, 135-136)?” Sam Harris, the popular atheist author, protests similarly that atheism is not a belief system or philosophy but rather “the noise that reasonable people make in the presence of unjustified religious beliefs” (2006, 51).

There is more to the contestation of belief besides the conflict between a researcher's scientific terminology and the concerns of participants about the connotations of that terminology in their own struggles. There is also the contestation between those who have long tried to explain religious belief and action within a scientific framework and other scholars arguing that they may be chasing after constellations, seen only from our Western perspective.

Why do human beings, across space and time, tend to believe in supernatural agents? This was a central question for many of the "founding fathers" of anthropology, including E.B. Tylor (1871) and Emile Durkheim (1912). And while it may be the case that most anthropologists no longer attempt to answer such large and ambitious questions, a small but growing number of cognitive scientists of religion are again addressing the question of supernatural beliefs (Lawson and McCauley, 1990; Guthrie 1993; Boyer, 2001; Atran, 2002; Whitehouse, 2000, 2004; Barrett, 2004). These scholars are optimistic in addressing this question, believing that the findings of the cognitive and evolutionary sciences will allow us to move beyond the founding fathers.

Many doubt, however, how far beyond the founding fathers cognitive scientists of religion are likely to get, given that, like their ambitious intellectual predecessors, they identify "beliefs" as objects of explanation. The behaviourist perspective in psychology, the eliminativist position in philosophy of mind, and the social-constructivist perspective in anthropology and religious studies all call into question the scientific validity of the term "belief." If these criticisms are valid, the new science of religious beliefs is a doomed enterprise, merely an exercise in playing with our own biased categories. Below, I will defend the possibility of a science of belief from these criticisms, as well as

demonstrate its legitimacy in the analysis of non-theism. By utilizing the functionalist perspective of much contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive science, I will offer a minimal but productive definition of belief that allows for a science of belief.

### Criticisms of “Belief”

One of the most common criticisms of belief, made by both psychologists (Watson, 1930) and anthropologists (Needham, 1972; Steadman and Palmer, 1995), is that beliefs are unobservable. The argument is that, since observation is the foundation for all science, there can be no science of belief.

The criticism that beliefs are unobservable and therefore unscientific is central to the project of behaviourist psychology. While early psychologists managed to begin the scientific study of the mind in the latter half of the nineteenth century, some of their methods, most notably the method of introspection championed by Wilhelm Wundt, were heavily criticized (Holyoak, 1999). The behaviourist movement saw Wundt’s introspection as too subjective and inconsistent, leading them to reject not only Wundt’s work but all theories and frameworks postulating the existence of mental states such as beliefs, desires, and emotions in the explanation of behaviour. These states are not directly observable and therefore, according to behaviourists, not legitimate objects of scientific study. Instead of analyzing these unverifiable states, the purpose of scientific, behaviourist psychology was “to predict, given the stimulus, what reaction will take place; or, given the reaction, state what the situation or stimulus is that has caused the reaction,” with no reference at all to internal states of the organism (Watson, 1930, 11).

While most psychologists recognized the validity of “belief” as a scientific term after psychology’s “cognitive revolution” in the 1950s and 60s, the criticism that beliefs are unobservable and, therefore, unscientific, has continued in the work of several anthropologists. Evans-Pritchard (1956) writes that ultimately, he cannot know the psychic attitudes of the Nuer regarding their beliefs in *kwoth*, and that such interior states are “better left to the theologians,” effectively removing such states from scientific analysis. Similarly, Rodney Needham relates a dream of working amongst the Penan in which he cannot find the proper Penan words to say “I believe in God” (1972). Upon awaking, he realizes that he has no way of knowing their psychic attitudes toward the deity Pesalong.

Perhaps most forcefully, Steadman and Palmer (1995) have argued that beliefs in supernatural agents are just as hard to identify and observe as supernatural agents themselves. They argue that, by accepting proclamations of “belief” as accurately reflecting the mental states of the informant, anthropologists and other scholars of religion are neglecting the very real possibility that informants, for whatever reason, are lying or misleading them. If one cannot reliably observe, identify, and verify the phenomenon under study, they reason, how is one to make any progress in understanding it? For Steadman and Palmer, the unobservableness of beliefs presents anthropologists with a problematic situation from which there is no escape. Consequently, a scientific approach to religion should not attempt to explain beliefs in supernatural agents, which are unverifiable, but rather the “communicated acceptance” of a claim involving supernatural agents, which we can readily verify by observing speech, writing, and behaviour.

Another set of critiques concern not the unobservableness of beliefs, but their non-existence. These critiques originate from philosophers of mind, who are engaged in a long-standing conversation about the nature of our mental lives and how they are related to our physical bodies.

The notion that people have beliefs and desires and that these states explain their behaviours (e.g. John goes to the refrigerator because he desires food and he believes that the refrigerator contains food for him to eat) is called *folk psychology* by most philosophers and cognitive scientists. It underlies a significant portion of our psychological science and nearly all of our everyday interpretations of how our fellow human beings behave; indeed, a significant body of research in the cognitive sciences suggests that we have a natural, pan-human tendency to interpret actions in this way (Baron-Cohen, 1995; Callaghan et al., 2005). Folk psychology, however, is not accepted by all philosophers of mind and neuroscientists. For many, most notably eliminative materialists such as Paul and Patricia Churchland, folk psychology is a mistaken theory of human cognition and behaviour. The Churchlands argue that, as neuroscience tells us more and more about how brains work, theoretical constructs such as “belief” and “desire” will make less and less sense as ways to conceive of human cognition (Churchland, 1981; Churchland and Churchland, 1999). For the Churchlands and other eliminative materialists, the classical, functional approach and vocabulary will be replaced by what has come to be known as the “connectionist” approach and vocabulary, which conceives of mental phenomena as patterns of activity amongst large numbers of interconnected neurons. For eliminativists, beliefs and desires will be replaced in our

scientific ontology by different patterns of neuronal firings, just as the notion of phlogiston has been replaced by ideas about oxidation and combustion.

Perhaps the best known critiques of “belief” for anthropologists, however, are the social constructivist critiques offered by Rodney Needham (1972), Malcolm Ruel (1982), and Jean Pouillon (1982). Needham, Ruel, and Pouillon outline the history of the term “belief” in western discourse, as well as the numerous connotations and associations it has built up over the course of that history, and consequently find it unsuitable as a comparative anthropological category.

Needham has subjected “belief” to the most extensive criticism, as he questions the utility and validity of the term in great historical and philosophical detail throughout *Belief, Language, and Experience* (1972). He argues that while some of our psychological concepts, such as imagination, have a real phenomenological basis, our concept of “belief” does not (134-135). Needham concludes that, instead of resulting from a common human experience, our concept of “belief” results from the word itself and the linguistic conventions surrounding it (108).

Needham reaches this conclusion through an analysis of both the lexical and ideational history of the term “belief.” Regarding the term’s lexical history, Needham notes that both the Middle English *bilēven* and the Old High German *gilouben*, as well as other terms such as love and *lieben*, have their roots in the Indo-European *leubh-*, meaning “to love, want, desire” (Needham, 1972, 41-42). Through a variety of socio-linguistic processes, *leubh-* has come to mean both “believe” in English and *libidine* (lust, or lewdness) in Spanish. For Needham, such relationships make plain the fact that “the

general notion represented by the English verbal concept of belief is complex, highly ambiguous, and unstable” (43).

Besides this lexical history, Needham also outlines the ideational history of the concept of belief, tracing it to a combination of two distinct concepts in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the *Septuagint*), which was embraced by early Christians. From the Hebrew comes the term *he' mīn*, which translates as “to believe” and can be used in reference to either statements or people. In referring to statements, *he' mīn* means to accept something as true and to have the “proper” attitude towards that information (Needham, 1972, 46). In referring to people, it means something quite similar to the English term “trust.” This latter meaning is the primary one of the Hebrew Bible, as it is used to express the trust that people have in their reciprocal relationship with God. From the Greek comes the term *pisteúein*, which was used as the translation of the Hebrew *he' mīn*. Being based on the idea of *pístis*, connoting trust, confidence, loyalty, and certainty, *pisteúein* was not used in relation to gods in classical Greek but gradually came to be used so as it became an important term in the propaganda of a variety of proselytizing religions in the region, including Christianity (47-48). The Greek term took on new connotations in early Christianity with the writings of the New Testament, as the apostle Paul drew strong connections between belief and obedience and the term began to refer primarily to the acceptance of the *kerygma* or “message of Christ” (48-49).

Needham, along with Ruel and Pouillon, notes that nearly all of the connotations represented in the lexical and ideational histories of the term “belief” are present in contemporary usage. To say that one “believes” in a statement, especially a religious

statement, is to not just say that one accepts the statement as factual, but to colour this acceptance with shades of emotion and loyalty and liken it to the type of love and trust between close friends or lovers. The key point that Needham, Ruel, and Pouillon make is that while some may view this mixture of acceptance, loyalty, and love as a universal human psychological capacity, it is clearly the product of a complex and specific history and unsuitable for comparative use; using the term “belief” in discussions of non-western peoples places the burdens of the term’s history and associations on their mental lives, which may have quite different attitudes than our own. Such analyses appear to make a science of “belief” naïve and mistaken.

### “Belief” in the Cognitive Sciences

Specifying the relationship between the mental and the physical has been a central concern for philosophers of mind for centuries. The twentieth century saw the growth of many different perspectives on the mind such as behaviourism, identity theory, and eliminative materialism. Arguably no perspective, however, has had the philosophical or scientific impact that functionalism has had, as it has become the most dominant philosophical perspective on the mind and forms the basis for most research in the cognitive sciences (Block, 1996; Malony, 1999).

The premise of functionalism is that mental states, such as beliefs, desires, and emotions, are not to be defined according to their constitution (e.g. mental substance or brain states) but instead are to be defined by their functional, causal roles in a cognitive system. Cognitive systems take in sensory inputs, perform a host of operations on those inputs according to a variety of rules, and produce the outputs of behaviour and, in some

cases, conscious experience. Individual mental states are causally and functionally connected to other mental states, sensory inputs, and behavioural outputs (Block, 1996), and these connections constitute what it is to be a particular mental state. For example, by examining the work in the cognitive sciences and functionalist philosophy, we can define “belief” as: *the state of a cognitive system holding information (not necessarily in propositional or explicit form) as true in the generation of further thought and behaviour* (Barrett and Lanman, 2008). I will argue that this minimal, functional definition of belief allows us to pursue a science of belief and answer the above criticisms.

Functionalism itself, of course, has not escaped controversy. John Searle’s Chinese Room argument (1980) and Hilary Putnam’s Twin Earth thought experiment (1975), for example, have engendered extensive debates among philosophers about the viability of functionalism. Despite these ongoing controversies, functionalism remains the dominant philosophical position and the basis of much of contemporary cognitive science, which continually produces strongly progressive “research programmes” (Lakatos, 1978). Research in the functionally-based cognitive sciences has yielded a wealth of information about the mind, producing better and more useful understandings of numerous cognitive capacities such as memory (Schacter, 1996) as well as cognitive disorders such as autism (Baron-Cohen, 1995).

Our understanding of belief, and religious belief in particular, has benefited from the cognitive sciences in several ways, including the important distinction between implicit and explicit beliefs and the demonstration of the power of implicit beliefs (Barrett and Keil, 1996; Chaiken and Trope, 1999; Sperber, 1997).

What makes much of the work on implicit beliefs so relevant to a science of religious beliefs is that they do not stay neatly separated from explicit beliefs. Instead, implicit and explicit beliefs are very much connected, and the main direction of influence is upward, with implicit beliefs doing much to determine our explicit beliefs and behaviours. Implicit beliefs, for example, serve as defaults for explicit beliefs when no explicit beliefs have been formulated about a topic, a phenomenon we recognize as a “gut feeling” or an “intuition.” In addition, the plausibility of explicit beliefs is greatly affected by how well they match with our implicit beliefs. Developmental and cognitive psychologists, for instance, have demonstrated that human beings and other primates possess a host of implicit beliefs about the nature and behaviour of physical objects (Spelke et al., 1992; Povinelli, 2000). And while it is the case that explicit concepts violating just one implicit intuition about physical objects enjoy a mnemonic advantage (Boyer and Ramble, 2001), violating too many of these intuitions makes an explicit concept both less memorable and less plausible. We can witness this implausibility in the difficulty that people have in learning quantum physics or embracing Paul Tillich’s notion of God as “the ground of all being” (1973) instead of an agent located in space-time (Boyer, 2001; Barrett and Lanman, 2008).

The cognitive sciences, then, by assuming the philosophical position of functionalism, have generated a host of progressive research programmes that are continually giving us more and more information about how our minds work and why we find certain cultural ideas more plausible than others. Underlying this work is the minimal definition of belief given above. This definition of belief not only allows for progressive research into the functioning of the mind, but also allows us to escape most

of the criticisms that the term “belief” has come under by psychologists, philosophers, and anthropologists.

### Answering the Critics

In response to the psychologists and anthropologists who are troubled by the fact that beliefs and other propositional attitudes are not directly observable, I might first point out that the impossibility of direct observation has not stopped physicists from creating progressive research programmes, with many technological benefits, on the topic of sub-atomic particles, which are also not directly observable. Physicists can pursue a science of sub-atomic particles, just as cognitive scientists can pursue a science of belief, by examining the effects of these non-observable entities on the observable world, such as by using particle accelerators to infer the properties of quarks or by examining the eye movements and facial expressions of pre-linguistic infants to infer their beliefs about the physical world. And this is precisely what they have done, demonstrating that progressive science can be built on indirect observation.

The above allows the establishment and pursuit of a science of implicit, non-reflective beliefs. But what about the explicit, reflective beliefs that most social and cultural anthropologists are most interested in? As previously mentioned, implicit and explicit beliefs are not independent; they interact with one another, with most existing research indicating an important role for implicit beliefs in the determining of explicit beliefs and behaviour. Understanding implicit beliefs, then, takes us some of the way towards understanding explicit beliefs. If we know an individual’s implicit beliefs, for instance, evidence suggests that we can predict whether they would find a particular

explicit idea compelling as well as how they would interpret some stimuli (Barrett and Lanman, 2008). Indeed, Justin Barrett and his colleagues have demonstrated that implicit beliefs about agents, space, and time influence how individuals interpret ambiguous narratives about divine action to a much greater extent than those individuals' explicit, professed beliefs (Barrett and Keil, 1996, Barrett, 1998).<sup>23</sup>

Further, in both the laboratory and the field, we can attempt to minimize factors that we think may be leading participants to not be truthful about their beliefs. We can attempt to interview participants away from others. We can assure anonymity for any writings and we can even design anonymous online surveys, giving participants the ability to accurately report their explicit beliefs with much lower anxiety about the consequences of their reports. In some settings, we may even administer a social-desirability scale (Crowne and Marlowe, 1960; Johnson et al., 2002), which can tell us if our participants exhibit a general tendency to boost their image through their responses at the expense of truth. And while the social desirability scale is but a small tool, and one that admittedly does not accomplish the task of verifying whether or not individuals explicitly believe what they profess to believe, a cavalry that assuredly can accomplish this task is on its way. Sam Harris and colleagues have recently observed, using fMRI technology, the different brain states associated with explicit belief, disbelief, and uncertainty, demonstrating that beliefs in a variety of types of propositions all share a common neural profile, as do disbeliefs (2007). If these results are replicated, this procedure would allow neuroscientists the ability to present a participant with a

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<sup>23</sup> Some cognitive scientists of religion, including Bering (2006) argue that implicit beliefs are what we really should be interested in, as they are the beliefs that determine behaviour, but most cognitive scientists, and certainly most anthropologists, disagree, arguing that explicit beliefs are quite important to understanding human behaviour and society (Whitehouse, 2007; Laidlaw, 2007).

proposition, such as “Do you believe that ancestor spirits exist?” and, by monitoring their neural activity, observe whether or not they believe the proposition, regardless of their verbal response. While such techniques are currently confined to neuroscientists with extensively equipped laboratories, there is little reason to doubt that such technology will eventually be available in a mobile form for use by psychologists and anthropologists.<sup>24</sup>

It is unnecessary to abandon a science of beliefs because of their unobservability. When we can establish implicit beliefs through experimental procedures and, through empirically supported theory, connect those implicit beliefs to explicit beliefs, and when we can minimize the effects of less than truthful individuals on our accounts of the beliefs of a given group of people using a culturally-appropriate social desirability scale, and when we can observe beliefs and disbeliefs at the level of the brain using fMRI technology, we are very much engaged in a science of belief.

The charges against belief, however, do not end with charges of unobservability; eliminativists argue that beliefs do not exist to be observed in the first place. For eliminativists, mental activity is to be explained by patterns of activation amongst networks of neurons, not by propositional attitudes such as beliefs and desires.

As outlined above, the cognitive sciences, based on the philosophical position of functionalism, have produced and continue to produce progressive and compelling research programs in a plethora of areas, from an understanding of infant beliefs about physical objects (Spelke et al., 1992) to the implicit beliefs concerning personhood that all human beings appear to share (Baron-Cohen, 1995; Callaghan et al., 2005). For

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<sup>24</sup> Ethical questions will inevitably arise with the development of such technology. The point here, however, is not to debate the ethics of such a technology but merely to note that such technology would allow us to confirm whether or not an individual actually believes an explicit proposition by examining non-voluntary neuronal activity.

philosopher Daniel Dennett, this makes beliefs and desires very much like “centres of gravity” (1991). Centres of gravity, as Dennett relates, are abstract mathematical points “definable in terms of physical forces and other properties” and are important elements of strategy and design in domains as diverse as athletics and aeronautical engineering. Yet, centres of gravity are not physical things to be isolated and observed; they are abstract points that are useful in generating improved understandings and technologies.

Dennett’s position, similar in many ways to Lynne Rudder Baker’s (2001), is that beliefs, like centres of gravity, are useful abstractions for understanding and predicting actions, even though they may not be physically real. Thus, even if neuroscience fails to find brain states that can be identified as particular beliefs, a functional definition of belief can still yield successful predictions and research programmes. This position, of course, is not without its critics, and philosophers of mind continue to debate how to best understand the relationship between mind and brain and the status of the propositional attitudes, including “belief” and “desire.” The most important point for our purposes, though, is that whether or not beliefs are useful abstractions of neural activity or physically real brain states, the concept of “belief” has continuously demonstrated its value in producing new and useful findings and deserves to be a part of our scientific ontology. We have little reason to doubt that a science of belief is a philosophically valid enterprise.

As defined above, “belief” in the cognitive sciences is the state of a cognitive system holding information (not necessarily in propositional or explicit form) as true in the generation of further thought and behaviour. This definition of belief not only stands

up to criticisms of its unobservableness and its non-existence, but also its cultural construction.

While the criticisms of Needham, Ruel, and Pouillon are the most historically and culturally nuanced of any of the critiques of belief, they are, in light of the definition above, the easiest to dismiss, as they are criticisms of a much more elaborated and culturally specific definition of belief than the one offered here. Needham, Ruel, and Pouillon deftly review the history of the term “belief” and outline its varied connotations and associations. They present “belief” as a term with extensive historical, philosophical, and theological baggage which weighs down all attempts to use the term in cross-cultural comparison. As discussed above, Evans-Pritchard realized among the Nuer, as Needham did among the Penan, that the common Western concept of belief, with its undertones of passion and dedication, is just not present in the lives of all peoples.

Fortunately for the science of belief, we are not bound by the connotations of terminology; we can use terms to designate specific phenomena in the world as long as we make our definitions clear. We can utilize the definition of belief offered above and pursue a cross-cultural science of belief with confidence, as, under this definition, all human and non-human animals have beliefs. All have cognitive systems that represent the world in some way and act according to what they believe to be true about that world, and we can come to better know these beliefs by utilizing the tools of cognitive science and anthropology.

One may ask, however, whether it is intellectually honest and legitimate to retain the term “belief,” and to argue that one is conducting a “science of belief,” when one has eliminated many of the connotations that the term has built up throughout its lexical and

ideational history. As philosopher of science Robert N. McCauley has argued, this is not only perfectly legitimate, but has been common practice in the history of science.

Numerous precedents exist of changing the meaning of a term in light of empirical work for scientific purposes, including those of the terms *planet*, *evolution*, and *gravity* (McCauley, 1986). Pursuing a science of belief, then, is not accomplished via a philosophical sleight-of-hand, but via a common scientific practice of updating definitions based on empirical evidence. As McCauley argues, “definitions” are never “definitive” when it comes to empirical matters; “wherever empirical science is introduced, there are no final words” (2004).

Even if one accepts the arguments above concerning the legitimacy of a science of belief, there remains the issue of our responsibilities as researchers for the consequences of the words we choose. By choosing a certain word, such as belief, to designate a particular empirical phenomenon with which we are concerned, are we automatically endorsing that word’s connotations and thereby choosing sides in the ideological and philosophical disputes in which our participants are engaged? If so, what can we do about it?

By writing about the “beliefs” of non-theists regarding the existence or non-existence of supernatural agents, am I automatically taking the side of theistic critics of atheism, implying that their beliefs are just as much a matter of “faith” as theists’ beliefs? Am I also implying that, since they lack belief in the supernatural, they must also lack devotion to any abstract ideas and values? If so, how can I fulfil my duties as both a scholar seeking to advance our understanding of beliefs and as a fieldworker?

This thesis, as a whole, constitutes my answer to these questions. My view is that by reviewing a term's connotations and being as precise as we can be about how we are and are not employing it keeps us from endorsing those said connotations. Further, it is sometimes possible to address participants' concerns through one's work. Numerous atheists, including Karl from New York Atheists, for example, are concerned that talk about atheists as "non-believers" or lacking belief leaves atheists open to charges from theists that they must somehow be devoid of moral conviction and loyalty to a cause, since they "don't believe in anything." Yet, I perceived quite clearly during my time with atheist and humanist groups a depth of commitment and loyalty to various moral values and political philosophies and include an analysis of said "beliefs" later in this thesis; consequently, I directly address and refute the charges with which Karl and others were so concerned.

One must be wary, however, that in addressing the concerns of one's participants that one is not merely becoming a spokesperson for their views at the expense of commitment to stating what appears to be the case based on the best available evidence. Many, if not most, atheists, agnostics, and humanists, for example, argue that their views are the result of rational reflection on the available evidence and that religious beliefs result only when one is strongly affected by irrational forces such as indoctrination or emotional weakness and that "belief" necessarily means holding something to be true or being committed to something without evidence or rational justification. This is the view that guides Larry Hicock in his objection to Hunsberger and Altemeyer's survey, which labels an atheist as one who "believes that God does not exist." Yet, as will be discussed later in this thesis, the hypothesis that rational thought is solely responsible for non-

theism is an empirical claim and is based on a particular view of human cognition, a view that is very questionable in light of the evidence from both the cognitive sciences and the history of ideas. In this particular case, the evidence problematizes, rather than supports, the arguments of many atheists and humanists.

In attempting a science of religious beliefs, numerous scholars, including the present writer, are assuming that beliefs exist as objective elements of the world for us to study. As should be clear at this point, this is not an uncontroversial assumption, as scholars from numerous disciplines have expressed doubt that “belief” is a proper term or phenomenon for scientific study and many of the people whose beliefs we wish to discuss reject the term as describing their views because of its connotations.

What I hope to have made clear is that we can address all of these criticisms in a satisfactory way. Utilizing the minimal, functional definition of belief as the phenomena of a cognitive system holding information to be true in the generation of further thought and behaviour allows us to indirectly observe implicit beliefs, construct progressive research programs based on those observations, and avoid the connotations of the term “belief” that have kept it from being a suitable term for cross-cultural inquiry. Moreover, we can address many of the concerns our participants may have with the connotations of our terminology by being precise about how we are using a particular word and also offer support for their claims when they are supported by the available evidence. With this account of belief, I argue that we can legitimately pursue a science of supernatural agent beliefs. I now turn to that science.

## Chapter 3. Explaining Belief in Supernatural Agents

There have been many explanations for the fact that so many human beings believe in the existence of supernatural agents among both scholars and non-scholars alike. Some explanations focus on the nature and shortcomings of human reasoning, others on human emotions, and still others on human social structure. I will argue below, as Evans-Pritchard (1965) and Pascal Boyer (2001) have argued before me, that most of these explanations face insurmountable difficulties as scientific explanations of supernatural agent beliefs. I will outline the growing field of the cognitive science of religion as a way forward in the effort to explain such beliefs, but will also call attention to what I see as an explanatory gap in this approach as currently formulated. I will argue that recent interdisciplinary work by evolutionary anthropologist Joseph Henrich on the notion of credibility enhancing displays can help the cognitive science of religion cross this explanatory gap and better account for supernatural agent beliefs, as well as their absence.

### Varieties of Explanations

#### A) Failure of Rationality

At a quiet, Sunday evening meeting of the St. Louis Rationalist Society, after watching a few videos of atheist debates and religious politicians, Bart wondered aloud why people believe in supernatural agents like God or gods. He went on to offer his own answer to this question, which involved puzzling over both the grandeur and causality of sunsets, dreams, and death and the intellectual satisfaction that supernatural agent explanations can provide. Bart is not alone among contemporary atheists and humanists in positing

such an intellectualist account of belief in supernatural agents; I found individuals offering similar theories in every city and country I visited.

Conversations and debates about the origins of religion were quite common amongst the atheists and humanists I spent time with in the United States, United Kingdom, and Denmark. The existence and persistence of religion was very much a puzzle. “How can they possibly believe that stuff?” I frequently heard. “I just don’t understand how you can read the Bible and think, ‘OK.’ How does that happen?” In most of these discussions, the intellectualist position was outlined, quickly to be followed by an emotionalist one. One middle-aged man at a St. Louis Atheist Meetup exhaled and shook his head during one such conversation, “I guess some people just can’t face death, just can’t be alone.”

Underneath such questioning and theorizing is the assumption that belief in the existence of supernatural agents is something that is not obvious and that needs to be explained, as opposed to other types of beliefs that are thought to result from the proper functioning of our sensory and cognitive faculties. The assumption is that something has clearly gone wrong in those individuals who believe in supernatural agents. In the view of many atheists and humanists, humanity is rational. Human beings sense the world and act on this information through the use of reason in order to accomplish their ends. Since no sensory information directly concerning supernatural agents can be found, our rational capacities should rule out such beliefs. Yet there they are, all the same.

Atheists and humanists are not alone in either their theories or their assumptions. Rather, they share them with many social scientists. From Max Müller’s notion of poetic descriptions of natural wonders turning into supernatural agent beliefs through a “disease

of language” (Gifford lectures) to E.B. Tylor’s notion of animism emerging from the puzzlement over dreams and death (1876) to Emile Durkheim’s account of the totemic principle serving as a symbol of the otherwise incomprehensible “social” (1912) , to Bronislaw Malinowski’s account of how religion and magic exist to assuage the fear of death and lack of control (1948), to Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge’s theory of religious compensators (1987), scholars of religion and culture have commonly held that human beings are rational animals and that only some powerful process, such as a drive to understand the universe or society or an existential fear of death, could overpower our normal, rational faculties to produce supernatural beliefs.

While each of these individual theories faces its own difficulties, as evidenced by the criticisms of Evans-Pritchard (1965) and Pascal Boyer (2001),<sup>25</sup> all face two general problems. First, all constitute “magic-bullet” explanations that attempt to account for a great diversity of phenomena with one single process. Second, all are based on an overly charitable view of the rational status of human cognition.

Regarding magic-bullet explanations, ethnographers have documented a significant degree of diversity in religious traditions around the world, many of which differ extensively from Western monotheistic traditions. By attempting to explain this diversity in terms of a single process such as a general urge to explain the universe or a need for comfort in the face of death, Western scholars frequently reveal a lack of knowledge of the religious beliefs and practices in non-Western societies. For instance,

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<sup>25</sup> Evans-Pritchard (1965), for instance, criticizes emotionalist theories in that the emotional states thought to drive religiosity, such as guilt or anxiety, do not seem to be present at before or during many religious activities, as well as social theories such as Durkheim’s in that many situations exist in which the notions of the sacred have little relation to social structure, contradicting Durkheim’s claim that religious conceptions are projections of the social. Boyer also finds fault with these theories, arguing that intellectualist explanations such as Tylor’s assume a general urge to explain the universe, an assumption not born out by cognitive science, and that emotionalist theories such as Freud’s and Malinowski’s fail to explain why all sources of fear and anxiety do not produce comforting beliefs and practices.

if one accepts the idea that human beings believe in the existence of supernatural agents because they need to be comforted from a fear of death or the anxiety of an unpredictable world, how should one explain beliefs in the existence of very frightening, unpredictable supernatural agents and forces, such as those seen among the Fang in Cameroon (Boyer 2001) and the Azande of the Sudan (Evans-Pritchard 1937)? What exactly is comforting about the belief that unpredictable witchcraft may take one's life or one's family at any time? There is clearly more to explaining the belief in supernatural agents and forces than fear of death or terror at the unpredictability of life.

A more fundamental issue with these explanations is their assumption of a largely rational human nature. Theories about human thought and behaviour and how they are affected by environmental stimuli, from disastrous events to quiet discourse, cannot help but make assumptions about how human minds work in processing those events and discourses and producing meaning and behaviour (Shore 1996; Lawson and McCauley 1990; Lanman 2007). In the case of most atheist and humanist theories of religion, as well as most social scientific explanations of religion, the human mind is seen as operating largely according to the principles of rationality. This assumption of rationality is present in a wide variety of settings, from polemical atheist texts to atheist and humanist statements in meetings to debates with strong atheists defending the idea of humanity as fundamentally rational.

There is perhaps no more forceful statement of the view that the normal, healthy state of humanity is rational than the work of psychotherapist Albert Ellis, an author that several atheists in the United States instructed me to read if I wanted to learn more about the psychology of religion. In *The Case Against Religion* (1980), Ellis characterizes the

natural, healthy human condition as self-interested, self-directed, tolerant, accepting of uncertainty, intellectually flexible, objective, rational, scientific, committed to something outside of the self, risk-taking, and self-accepting (3-4). Religious belief, for Ellis, discourages most of these traits and therefore constitutes a “mental and emotional disturbance.” For Ellis, and presumably for those atheists who recommend his work, a human being will not hold religious beliefs if all of his or her mental processes are functioning in the ways for which they are designed.

While not all participants in atheist and humanist meetings were as direct as Ellis in labelling religious belief as a mental disorder affecting an otherwise rational mind, most discourse indeed revealed a view of human cognition as rational and religion as irrational, from the general puzzlement and theorizing over why some people believe in the existence of supernatural agents to statements such as “I’ve never met any religious people whose reasoning hasn’t been corrupted by their belief,” and constant references to religious instruction as “brainwashing.”

Moreover, this point was made most clear to me in a discussion I had with Karl of New York City. I told him that I was researching “atheism, agnosticism, humanism, and all things non-theism” and that two goals of the project were “to get a better descriptive understanding of what non-theists think and believe about a variety of issues as well as test a variety of ideas from psychology and anthropology about the causes of non-theism,” which was the normal introduction to my project. Karl immediately replied that what I really needed to be looking at was not what causes atheism but “how rational people can believe in religion; how is that possible?”

I responded to Karl with the main point of some of the research on human cognition, explored below, that human beings are not all that rational in the first place. He strongly disagreed with this, emphasizing to me that human beings are indeed rational and referencing how he and many other people he knew engaged in a rational process of research, comparison, and judgment on a regular basis when buying commodities such as cellular telephones. “I saw my friend evaluate all the pros and cons of these different models, rationally evaluate the costs and benefits, and make a sound choice for himself. Don’t tell me people are not rational.”

And as stated above, Karl and other atheists and humanists with this view are not alone. Many social scientists attempting to explain religion, as well as those working in other domains such as economics, have held to similar assumptions about human rationality. These scholars operate under what philosopher Edward Stein calls the “traditional,” “ideal,” or “standard” picture of rationality. Under the traditional account, people reason according to normative rational principles, except for the occasional “momentary lapse” or “performance error,” and take action according to their best interests as they rationally weigh the means and ends of a given situation (Stein 1996).

This traditional account has come under sustained assault from studies in the cognitive sciences over the last forty years demonstrating time and time again that human beings in a variety of settings, even those with extensive education, do not reason according to normative principles; in fact, they systematically deviate from them (Kahneman et al. 1982; Gigerenzer and Todd 1999; Gilovich 1993).<sup>26</sup> The implication of

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<sup>26</sup> While evidence against ideal rationality has accumulated through the efforts of numerous researchers, cognitive psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky’s work is among the most widely cited. One of their most famous studies concerns how language “frames” people’s rational decision making (1984). It might be thought that if people are rational, they reach beyond cultural-specific wording and grasp the true

such work is that rather than rational human beings merely deviating from their normal thought processes under certain conditions, our actual cognitive architecture is not constructed in ways conducive to ideally rational thought in the first place.<sup>27</sup>

According to accounts of bounded rationality, human reasoning can best be characterized as a set of simple heuristics that work quite well in producing adaptive behaviours given the limitations of time and information that human beings face. Cognitive and social psychologists have provided evidence for such simple heuristics in a wide variety of domains (Gigerenzer et al. 1999) and evolutionary psychologists and anthropologists have conducted both theoretical and empirical work exploring the role of evolved psychological mechanisms and cultural information in these simple heuristics, as

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meaning of statements and states of affairs, as this allows them to act in their own rational best interests. Kahneman and Tversky show that this is clearly not the case.

One of their experiments involves giving people two problems concerning a deadly disease that could kill six hundred people. In the two formally identical problems, subjects get two options of fighting the disease. In problem number one, option one saves two hundred people while option two gives a one-third chance of saving everybody and a two-thirds chance of saving nobody. When given problem one, nearly all people choose option number one and avoid the risk of so many people dying. In the second, formally identical problem, option one has four hundred people dying while option two gives a one-third chance that no one dies and a two-thirds chance that all six hundred die. When given problem two, nearly all people choose option number two, taking the risk to save the most people. Problem one *frames* results in positive terms, saving people, and most subjects choose the sure thing. Problem two frames results in negative terms, people dying, and subjects take the risk. The experiment shows that by framing decision options in positive or negative terms, one can cause subjects to avoid risks or take risks, respectively. The subjects are not rationally evaluating the means and ends of the situation and deciding according to self-interests. They do not recognize the identical nature of the problems.

Another study by Kahneman and Tversky reveals the conjunction fallacy in individuals' judgments of probability. When presented with a character description of a person named Linda who is single, 31, bright, outspoken and that, as a college student, majored in philosophy and expressed concern about social justice, participants normally rate "1) Linda is a bank teller and is active in the feminist movement" as being more likely than "2) Linda is a bank teller," though they do rank 3) Linda is active in the feminist movement" as being the most likely. By judging 1) to be more likely than 2), participants are committing the conjunction fallacy, as 2) will always be true when 1) is true and even though the notion of Linda's being in the feminist movement fits the description, it is not proved by it (Tversky and Kahneman 1983).

<sup>27</sup> Such evidence does not necessarily entail that we must label human beings as irrational, however, as several philosophers and psychologists argue for the notion of "bounded rationality," not only as a descriptor of human thought but as a more realistic notion of what rationality itself entails (Gigerenzer et al. 1999; Gigerenzer and Selten 2001; Stein 1996). Nor does it necessarily entail the futility of philosophy and science. The argument is not that human beings are incapable of reasoning according to normative principles when evaluating evidence, but merely that our cognitive systems are not constructed so as to naturally reason in this way in most situations.

well as how they can produce false and maladaptive results when operating in environments sufficiently different from those responsible for their development (Buss 2005; Henrich et al. 2001).

With this new, evidentially-supported view of human reasoning, we are led to re-evaluate explanations of beliefs in the existence of supernatural agents. No longer do we require overly-ambitious magic-bullet explanations for religious beliefs. We have no need to posit scenarios of traditionally rational, scientifically-oriented human beings butting their intellects up against the unknown or otherwise rational human beings merely being overcome by deep-seated desires for immortality and meaning. We have no need for such ambitious explanations because the rational mind that they argue must be overcome does not appear to exist. With this new view of human reasoning, the question shifts from how do rational people actually believe in the existence of supernatural agents to what heuristic cognitive devices and strategies do human beings possess that make such ideas attractive and believable.

## B) Socialization

While many atheists and humanists subscribe to the traditional view of human rationality, others at least partially embrace the model of bounded rationality and argue for the existence of a heuristic strategy of believing what one's close relatives say about the world. Further, they argue that such socialization explains why human beings believe in supernatural agents.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps no atheist is more famous in his championing of this idea

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<sup>28</sup> I use the word "partially" here because it is clear that while many atheists and humanists recognize the "listen to your parents" heuristic, they then infer that this heuristic must then be sufficiently powerful to over-ride our otherwise ideally rational minds. The heuristic ends up becoming yet another magic-bullet explanation for how rational animals such as human beings can come to believe in the supernatural.

than Oxford biologist Richard Dawkins, who in *The God Delusion* argues that religious beliefs are a by-product of the fact that “natural selection builds child brains with a tendency to believe whatever their parents and tribal elders tell them” (2006, 176). For Dawkins and the numerous atheists and humanists that endorse this view, believing the testimony of others in one’s society is a useful cognitive heuristic in complex, dangerous environments in which learning by trial-and-error can prove fatal.

Further, when I asked non-theists in my survey sample about how old they were when they became or began to self-identify as non-theists and also to describe this process, many participants responded by attributing their never having any supernatural agent beliefs to their lack of religious socialization. “I was born into an atheist family, so I have never been a believer” replied a 49 year old male Non-theist from Hungary. A nineteen year old female atheist from the United States said similarly that, “I was not raised by religious parents or in a particularly religious community (New York City) so never came to believe in a god.” A 40 year old male American atheist said further, “I think this (atheism) is the natural state, if you are not indoctrinated. I always had it.” There is, then, a common belief among non-theists that children are especially susceptible to religious ideas propagated by their parents and communities and that whether or not one comes to have beliefs in the existence of supernatural agents is largely a matter of socialization.

Once again, a common theory among non-theists is also found among anthropologists, humanities scholars, and social scientists. Further, in the case of theories regarding the importance of socialization in determining our beliefs and behaviours, non-theists offer a theory that is largely a truism in anthropology and psychology. From the

early work of John Locke stressing the importance of experience in the determination of beliefs (1690) and that of Giambattista Vico stressing that human beliefs, thoughts, and feelings were profoundly different in other societies (1725), to early anthropologists such as Boas (1911) and Rivers (1916) stressing the role of culture in motivation and behaviour, to Marshall Sahlins' claims concerning the important role of Hawaiian mythology in determining how Hawaiians perceived the arrival of Captain James Cook (1995), social scientists have stressed the determining role of social and cultural environments on individual belief and behaviour.<sup>29</sup>

The importance of socialization for determining not only the content of religious beliefs but also whether or not an individual has them in the first place has been argued forcefully by social psychologists Bruce Hunsberger and Bob Altemeyer over the past three decades (Hunsberger 1983; Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997; Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006). Hunsberger and Altemeyer endorse a "social learning theory" or "socialization" theory for religious belief and apostasy, based on their surveys and interviews with thousands of university students in the United States and Canada.

The crucial measure in their work is what they call a "religious emphasis" scale, consisting of twenty questions about the extent to which the "important people" in the participants' lives, such as parents, teachers, and church officials, engaged in specific socializing actions. Items include "Review the teachings of the religion at home?,"

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<sup>29</sup> While nearly all social scientists and psychologists acknowledge the role of socialization on belief and behaviour, there remains considerable debate about both the nature and extent of such influence. Some anthropologists and sociologists suggest that all beliefs, true or false, religious or scientific, are to be explained by looking at the social contexts in which those beliefs are created and transmitted (Barnes and Bloor 1982) as opposed to some standard of rationality or by obvious physical reality and also that cultural traditions are the key to understanding behaviour (such as Hawaiians' reactions to Captain Cook) (Sahlins 1995). Others in evolutionary psychology and anthropology argue that, despite the relevance of socialization, evolved psychological mechanisms also work to produce beliefs and behaviour, affect what types of beliefs and behaviours can more easily be transmitted via socialization, and even allow for socialization to occur in the first place (Buss 2005, Boyer 2001, Sperber 1996).

“Make religion the centre, the most important part of your life?,” and “Emphasize attending religious services as acts of personal devotion?” Participants are instructed to respond to each question using a 7 point scale.

Hunsberger and Altemeyer continually find significant differences between individuals who have become apostates and those who have not, with apostates having significantly lower religious emphasis scores than their non-apostate co-participants. This finding suggests that the more emphasis is placed on religious beliefs and behaviours in the homes, schools, and churches of an individual, the more likely that individual will be to exhibit those beliefs and behaviours.

While we can accept Hunsberger and Altemeyer’s data and therefore the importance of socialization in determining whether or not an individual becomes an apostate from their original religious tradition, several problems face the socialization account as an explanation for why human beings so commonly believe in the existence of supernatural agents.

First, the socialization hypothesis cannot account for the widespread similarities in supernatural concepts without taking on unsubstantiated diffusionist assumptions. How are we to explain the fact that some number of individuals in all known societies believes in the existence of non-physical agents or the fact that so many societies view some of these agents as being concerned with social behaviour? These similarities most likely arise from factors besides socialization.

Second, socialization alone cannot account for historical changes, such as the widely documented phenomena of secularization in Western Europe since the end of the Second World War (Bruce 2002; Norris and Inglehart 2004). If a simple, deterministic

version of the socialization hypothesis is true and children take on the beliefs and practices of their parents, how are we to account for the decline in religious belief and practice in such countries as Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands? Other factors besides socialization appear to also be responsible for the presence or absence of supernatural agent beliefs and practices surrounding them.

Finally, if we accept the most common version of the socialization hypothesis, which holds that beliefs and practices are internalized merely through imitation and a domain general learning capacity (exhibited by Hunsberger and Altemeyer's focus on "emphasis"), we are assuming a view of the human mind incongruent with the evidence from the cognitive sciences. As cognitive scientists from Steven Pinker (1997) and Pascal Boyer (2001) to Annette Karmiloff-Smith and colleagues (1997) have pointed out, no cognitive system can learn from its environment without some pre-existing capacities and dispositions to attend to particular features of the environment and treat them in particular ways. If we accept the socialization hypothesis, how are we to account for the fact that some supernatural concepts, such as non-physical agents who act in the world according to their own beliefs and desires, are so easy to acquire from the cultural environment while other supernatural concepts, such as Paul Tillich's notion of God as the "ground of being" (1963) are so difficult to acquire and use?<sup>30</sup> It appears that particular cognitive capacities and dispositions, rather than mere imitation and absorption of cultural discourse, are also at work in the determination of our beliefs.

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<sup>30</sup> Such cognitive advantage in acquiring and transmitting concepts and beliefs is not limited to religious concepts. One can also see such dynamics in concepts about the physical world, as particular notions about the physical world, such as those postulated in quantum mechanics, are not easily absorbed from the environment but require extensive education.

### C) Cognition and Aggregate Relevance

The weaknesses of explaining supernatural agent beliefs as a failure of rationality or merely the result of socialization point to the importance of cognitive mechanisms in influencing our beliefs. Ascertaining what cognitive mechanisms human beings possess and how they operate has been the task of cognitive scientists for half a century (Wilson and Keil 1999; Bechtel and Graham 1998). Their empirical efforts have problematized the notions that we arrive at our beliefs through a process of ideally rational thought or a process of simple socialization but have also offered a way forward in understanding the foundations of supernatural agent beliefs.

This way forward was anticipated by Dan Sperber with his “epidemiological” approach to culture (1985, 1990). According to the epidemiological account, cognitive mechanisms and tendencies compose the “local conditions” that allow particular types of mental representations to survive and thrive within human minds and therefore become “cultural” representations, in that similar mental representations are shared by others in a population. Inspired by Sperber and other theorists such as Noam Chomsky, a small number of scholars in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s began to examine how particular cognitive mechanisms and tendencies could help explain the ubiquity of a variety of phenomena that have normally been called “religious.”<sup>31</sup>

E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley (1990; McCauley and Lawson 2002), for instance, outlined a theory of religious ritual competence that argues for the importance of what they refer to as our “action representation systems” in generating

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<sup>31</sup> In saying that these phenomena have normally been called religious, these scholars recognize that the term, “religion,” does not refer to a natural kind amenable to scientific explanation. They argue, however, that numerous phenomena that we normally classify as religious, such as supernatural agent beliefs and ritualized behaviour, do constitute real patterns in the world that are amenable to scientific explanation (Boyer 2001; Whitehouse 2004).

patterns in ritual practice, such as why some types of ritual are more likely to be emotionally arousing or more likely to be repeated. Shortly thereafter, Harvey Whitehouse formulated his theory of modes of religiosity, which argues for the importance of the properties of our mnemonic systems in explaining the tendency of religious traditions to gravitate towards certain social and ritual arrangements, namely more localized communities emphasizing infrequent but emotionally arousing rituals and more dispersed communities emphasizing frequent but non-arousing rituals (1992, 1995, 2000).

In the effort to explain supernatural agent beliefs, the first scholars to utilize cognitive theory were Pascal Boyer (1994, 2001) and Stewart Guthrie (1980, 1993). Boyer argues that evidence from cognitive and developmental psychology strongly supports the idea that, despite the specific ontological categories that a culture may transmit, the same sets of intuitive inferences related to physical objects, living kinds, artefacts, and persons appear on a relatively fixed developmental schedule in human children.<sup>32</sup> Boyer calls such inferences “intuitive” in that they occur automatically when an individual is confronted with a member of a given ontological category. He argues further that a significant portion of what have traditionally been called “religious” representations are in fact “minimally counter-intuitive representations” (MCI) in that they violate at least one, but not usually more than two, intuitive inferences pertaining to

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<sup>32</sup> For example, Angeline Lillard and colleagues have documented cross-culturally that the maturationally natural system (McCauley, in press) that most psychologists call Theory of Mind (TOM), a system that produces intuitive beliefs and inferences about the intentional states of agents, emerges in children at around five years of age, despite differing social contexts and explicit notions of what constitutes personhood (Callaghan, Rochat, et al. 2005). Similarly, Elizabeth Spelke and her colleagues have identified a number of the implicit beliefs about physical objects that humans develop within the first months of life, such as the belief that an object will fall if not supported, that it cannot pass through other objects, and that it requires time to move (Spelke 1991).

their ontological category.<sup>33</sup> For example, a statue that can hear and understand human speech is a minimally counter-intuitive representation in that it involves a transfer of an intuitive inference from the category “person” to a member of the category “artefact.”

Boyer argues that minimally counter-intuitive concepts are more memorable than other types of concepts and consequently are more likely to be transmitted to others and become widespread. He supports this argument through a cross-cultural study in France, Gabon, and Nepal that suggests minimally counter-intuitive representations are more memorable than entirely intuitive representations, more counter-intuitive representations that violate multiple intuitive inferences, and merely strange representations (Boyer and Ramble 2001).

Stewart Guthrie, however, argues that supernatural agent concepts are compelling not because of their being somehow opposed to our everyday intuitions about the world but because of our intuitive tendency to anthropomorphize. Guthrie documents this tendency in numerous societies, contexts, and even in other species, from human beings seeing faces in the clouds or the message of some divine being in a storm or earthquake to a bobcat mistaking a stick for a snake. Guthrie argues that overattributing agency in general is an evolutionary successful cognitive strategy, as false positives, such as mistaking a boulder for a bear, are much less costly than false negatives, such as mistaking a bear for a boulder; the former may produce a pause in activity, fear, or embarrassment, while the latter may produce death. He argues further that seeing such

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<sup>33</sup> This particular definition of “counter-intuitive” is a technical one in that the criteria for counter-intuitiveness are not given simply by how difficult an idea is to understand or accept but by the properties of the maturationally natural cognitive systems discussed by cognitive and developmental psychologists. Therefore, while most Americans may state that they find the concept of the Christian God intuitive in everyday discourse, the concept of the Christian God, according to the properties of our maturationally natural cognitive systems, is counter-intuitive.

agency as in some way human is also a “good bet” as “the most valuable interpretations usually are those that disclose the presence of whatever is most important to us,” that being other human beings (1993, 3).

The accounts of Boyer and Guthrie have been developed and synthesized over the last ten years by a number of scholars in what has come to be called the cognitive science of religion, who offer broadly similar accounts of the role of a variety of cognitive mechanisms in explaining supernatural agent beliefs (Barrett 1999, 2004; Barrett and Nyhof 2001; Pyysiäinen 2001, 2004; Boyer 2001; Atran 2002; Atran and Norenzayan 2005; Slone 2004; Sorensen 2005; Kirkpatrick 2005; Whitehouse 2004). These scholars explain the human propensity to form supernatural agent beliefs as a result of what Boyer calls “aggregate relevance” (2001). For Boyer, aggregate relevance refers to the “successful activation of a whole variety of mental systems” and constitutes an explanation for the prevalence of certain types of beliefs by assuming that the more intuitions with which a concept or statement is consistent, the more credence we give to it (2001, 298). For cognitive scientists of religion, the task has been to outline the roles a variety of cognitive mechanisms play in producing intuitions that make supernatural agent concepts believable.

Following Boyer, cognitive scientists of religion note the role of our intuitive ontological inference systems in making supernatural or, to be more specific, minimally-counter intuitive concepts more memorable than other types of concepts (Atran 2002; Barrett 2004; Pyysiäinen 2001). Further, following Guthrie, cognitive scientists of religion note that our agency detectors, commonly labelled as our hypersensitive agency detective devices (HADD) (Barrett 2004), help make supernatural agent concepts more

believable, as our HADD produces intuitions of the presence of some agency and, because of their counter-intuitive properties such as invisibility, supernatural agents cannot be discounted as being responsible for these intuitions.

In addition, cognitive scientists of religion have argued that, because of their counter-intuitive properties, supernatural agents can be thought to have access to “strategic information” about our lives and the lives of others (Boyer 2001).<sup>34</sup> Consequently, these concepts possess significant “inferential potential” in that our cognitive mechanisms devoted to representing the beliefs and intentions of agents, commonly called Theory of Mind (TOM) (Premack and Woodruff 1978; Wellman 1990; Baron-Cohen 1995), produce inferences about what the supernatural agent may know about our actions and our cognitive mechanisms devoted to moral evaluations (Hauser 2006; Haidt and Kesebir 2009) produce inferences about how such an agent would evaluate such actions (Boyer 2001; Barrett 2004). All of these inferences, according to many cognitive scientists of religion, work to increase the aggregate relevance of supernatural agent concepts.

Further, Barrett (2004) argues that supernatural agents are made more believable because of the human tendency, present very early in life, to view the natural world as being created by some agency for some purpose. Barrett calls attention to the work of developmental psychologists Olivera Petrovich (1997, 1999), whose findings suggest that children favour explanations of divine rather than human creation for the natural world, Margaret Evans, whose findings suggest that children specifically taught evolutionary

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<sup>34</sup> The term “strategic information” is introduced by Boyer in *Religion Explained* to label the subset of information in an individual’s mind that triggers its socio-cognitive mechanisms, including those pertaining to cheating, cooperation, competence, and trustworthiness. Boyer stresses that to call a piece of information “strategic” says nothing at all about the piece of information itself but rather how that piece of information is treated by a mind (2001, 155).

explanations for species will still favour creationist accounts (2001), and Deborah Kelemen, whose findings suggest that children view features of natural objects as purposeful (an example being children thinking that certain rocks are pointy so that no one will sit on them) (Kelemen 1999). Barrett argues that the intuitive creationism displayed in these studies leads human beings to more easily believe in the existence of supernatural agents and for their having a role in the creation of natural phenomena (2004).

### Some Remaining Issues in the Cognitive Science of Religion

#### A) Explaining Belief

The cognitive account offered by Boyer, Barrett, and others represents a great improvement over previous theories of supernatural agent beliefs in that it can account for the similarities between the supernatural agents represented in societies around the world. Cognitive scientists of religion rightly point out that the vast majority of the supernatural agents postulated by societies around the world and throughout history are minimally counterintuitive agents (MCI-agents) and offer an account of why that is the case. The world's religious traditions are not dominated by maximally counter-intuitive agencies and forces, nor are they dominated by merely intuitive agents and forces. Rather, because of the mnemonic and inferential effects that concepts of MCI-agents have on our cognitive systems, they are more likely to survive and thrive in human minds than many other types of concepts.

The account offered by cognitive scientists of religion, however, does not fully explain why human beings actually believe in the existence of MCI-agents. In the

aggregate relevance account of Boyer, Barrett, Atran, Pyysiäinen, and others, for instance, which argues that concepts are more likely to be believed if they are consistent with the intuitions produced by our cognitive mechanisms, only a few such mechanisms are discussed and no examination of their relative strength is conducted.

Cognitive scientists have discussed hundreds, if not thousands, of cognitive mechanisms and tendencies since the 1950's. Yet, cognitive scientists of religion have only involved a select few in their explanations of supernatural agent beliefs, including intuitive ontologies, HADD, TOM, and the tendency to engage in promiscuous teleology. If we are to explain religious beliefs by demonstrating their consistency with the outputs of intuitive cognitive systems, then a wider range of the cognitive mechanisms and tendencies discussed in the cognitive sciences is needed. For, as of now, it is possible that other cognitive mechanisms and tendencies not currently discussed in the cognitive science of religion are actually more important in lending intuitive credibility to supernatural agent beliefs. In addition, it is possible that numerous other intuitive cognitive mechanisms work to make supernatural agent beliefs implausible. Without a more comprehensive examination of the myriad cognitive mechanisms and tendencies discussed in the cognitive sciences, the aggregate relevance explanation of belief is questionable.

Likewise, if it is indeed the case that supernatural agent concepts are believed because of their consistency with our intuitions, then it is both plausible and likely that some intuitions are more important than others in the evaluation of such concepts. Given the limited number of cognitive mechanisms discussed by cognitive scientists of religion, there is a significant risk that some other, less examined cognitive mechanism is actually

more important in determining belief and non-belief. There is a real chance that this is indeed the case, as cognitive scientists of religion largely focus on mechanisms having to do with the content of concepts and the biases created by these mechanisms (content biases) while a significant body of work has been conducted on the role of mechanisms and tendencies having to do with the contexts in which concepts are transmitted (context biases) on our beliefs.<sup>35</sup> It is difficult to ascertain, and little effort has yet gone into ascertaining, how disagreements between these various cognitive systems are handled and which mechanisms have the most influence on whether or not an individual believes in the existence of some supernatural agency.

Consequently, it is premature for cognitive scientists of religion to argue that they have explained supernatural agent beliefs by claiming that such beliefs are consistent with the intuitions provided by our intuitive ontologies, TOM, HADD, and tendency to engage in promiscuous teleology. There are many more cognitive mechanisms to consider and their relative importance in producing religious belief has yet to be determined.

Further, there are numerous minimally counter-intuitive agent concepts whose properties are also consistent with our cognitive mechanisms which no one (or very few at the most) believe to exist, including many pop-culture figures such as Superman, Casper the Friendly Ghost, and Mickey Mouse. This “Mickey Mouse problem,” as it has become known in the writings of the cognitive science of religion, casts further doubt on

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<sup>35</sup> The distinction between content and context biases has been discussed in the work of several evolutionary anthropologists concerned with how human beings manage to negotiate the trade-off between costly but more accurate information about their environments and less costly but possibly less accurate information, including Boyd and Richerson (2005) and Henrich and Henrich (2007). Content biases dispose us to accept beliefs or behaviours based on the appeal of the beliefs’ or behaviour’s content, such as a bias for salt rather than sawdust as a topping for popcorn or a bias for accepting propositions consistent with our existing beliefs (Henrich and Henrich 2007, 10-11). Context biases, on the other hand, dispose us towards accepting information from others exhibiting certain characteristics, such as success or prestige.

the notion that supernatural agent concepts are believed in because of their consistency with the intuitive outputs of the small group of cognitive mechanisms discussed thus far in the cognitive science of religion.

There have been efforts within the cognitive science of religion to address the Mickey Mouse problem, most notably Barrett (2008) and Atran and Norenzayan (2004). Both of these attempts, I will argue, fail to solve the problem I outlined above.

Justin Barrett, in his 2008 article “Why Santa Claus is Not a God,” argues that five criteria must be met for a concept to be a “successful god concept,” with success being defined as the existence of a community of people believing the concept and acting accordingly. The criteria for successful god concepts include: 1) being counter-intuitive, 2) being an intentional agent, 3) possessing strategic information, 4) being able to act in the world in detectable ways, and 5) being capable of motivating behaviours that reinforce belief (Barrett 2008, 149).

Barrett argues that while existing god concepts satisfy all five conditions, Santa Claus, as commonly represented in the United States and Europe, is inconsistently represented as being counter-intuitive (as opposed to being aided by special magical items) and only marginally possesses strategic information and the ability to motivate reinforcing behaviours. Consequently, Santa Claus is not a god. Barrett argues, however, that by sometimes being represented as counterintuitive and in some sense possessing strategic info and motivating reinforcing behaviours, Santa Claus enjoys more success as a concept than other characters such as Mickey Mouse, who while being both counter-intuitive and an intentional agent, is not at all represented as having access to

strategic information, being able to act in the world, or being capable of motivating reinforcing behaviours.

For Barrett, if a counter-intuitive agent is not represented as having access to strategic information, acting in the world, or motivating reinforcing behaviours, it will fail to inspire a community of believers and cult practitioners. Yet, this appears to present a paradox. In order to be represented as having access to strategic information, acting in our world, and being able to motivate reinforcing behaviours, the agent in question must be suggested to exist in reality. Mickey Mouse is a minimally counter-intuitive agent and consequently enjoys both mnemonic and inferential advantages over other types of concepts. Yet, how is Mickey Mouse to have access to our strategic information if he is represented as a fictional character and not as an agent in our world? If he were represented as existing, his having access to strategic information could become possible due to his ability to listen, remember, and understand, his small size, and his growing magical abilities (as exhibited in the film *Fantasia* (1940), which would potentially allow him to routinely escape detection. Similarly to the were-tiger shamans of the Batek in Malaysia, which Pascal Boyer uses as an illustration of how counter-intuitive properties such as invisibility and flight lead to agents having access to strategic information, Mickey Mouse would potentially be able to eavesdrop on people's conversations (Boyer 2001, 157).

Further, it is difficult to imagine how an intentional agent could be represented as acting in our world in detectable ways or motivating behaviour without already being thought to exist. If Mickey Mouse is represented as a fictional cartoon character, it follows that he will not be represented as acting in the world and on human affairs. If he

were thought to exist, he could most definitely act in our world and leave traces of his presence. Likewise, if he were thought to exist, it is quite possible that some number of people, however small the number, would behave in ways consistent with his existence and dependent upon his social and behavioural dispositions.

Barrett is surely correct in arguing that some counter-intuitive agents whose counter-intuitive properties actually prevent them from possessing strategic information or acting in the world, such as an all-seeing, all-knowing statue that cannot do anything but see and know, is not likely to be transmitted from generation to generation, as it would be mostly irrelevant to human affairs. Yet, Barrett and other cognitive scientists of religion are not just claiming to offer an explanation of why the world's religious traditions possess certain types of concepts rather than others but also claim to offer an explanation of why those concepts are believed. In this respect, the Mickey Mouse problem still stands. Mickey Mouse, like numerous god concepts, is a minimally counter-intuitive agent. Yet Mickey Mouse is not thought to exist and, consequently, is not thought to have access to strategic information, to be able to act in the world, or to motivate human behaviours. Explaining why Mickey Mouse is not thought to exist while other minimally counter-intuitive agents are thought to exist is still a vexing question for the cognitive science of religion, as it appears to depend on something outside of the conceptual properties of Mickey Mouse and more about the attitude taken towards Mickey Mouse by individuals and communities.

Scott Atran and Ara Norenzayan attempt to address the Mickey Mouse problem in their 2004 article, "Religion's Evolutionary Landscape: Counterintuition, Commitment, Compassion, Communion" by arguing that "religions invoke supernatural agents to deal

with emotionally eruptive existential anxieties such as death and deception,” that “emotions and anxieties motivate religious beliefs and quests for deliverance,” and that ritual performances alleviate these deep anxieties and thereby demonstrate the reality and efficacy of the supernatural agents. The difference between a true god and Mickey Mouse for Atran and Norenzayan, then, is that Mickey Mouse is not used in religious traditions to alleviate such anxieties through discourse and ritual performance. If he were used in this way, the discourse and ritual performances would result in Mickey Mouse being believed to exist by many of those participants.

Atran and Norenzayan are on solid ground in referring to the important role of ritual performance in promoting belief in supernatural agents, as will be discussed in more detail below. Yet, by linking ritual performance and belief in supernatural agents so closely with existential anxieties, they encounter the same significant problems facing all emotionalist/comfort explanations of religious beliefs.

Both anthropological and psychological evidence points away from the conclusion that human beings believe in supernatural agents because they find them comforting. As Boyer relates in his examination of emotionalist theories of religion, if supernatural agent concepts are solutions to emotional needs, they are not doing a very good job (2001, 20). Rather than relieving anxiety, many religions cause more emotional suffering and anxiety than they allay, even with their ritual performances. Examples include the Danish Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard’s personal struggles with Christianity and the Fang of Cameroon’s admission that their anti-witchcraft practices are in no way enough to offset the harmful powers of witches. Further, if it is anxiety and fear which motivate supernatural agent beliefs, it is certainly puzzling that the most

comforting and anxiety reducing supernatural concepts, such as New Age teachings of personal power and a benevolent universe (Heelas 1995) and liberal strains of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam emphasizing the love and forgiveness of God, exist in the relatively affluent West, while many distinctly non-comforting supernatural concepts, such as the vengeful ancestor spirits of the Kwaio (Keesing 1982), exist in many much less affluent and secure environments.

Psychological considerations also cast doubt on the notion that supernatural agents are thought to exist because of their comforting effects on individual psychology, as there is little to no evidence for the claim that finding a proposition comforting or enriching automatically increases its believability, much less actually make the proposition believable (Miller 1980; Bar-Hillel and Budescu 1995). Further, the little evidence that does exist for this claim does not concern anything as dramatic as the existence of supernatural agents. Rather, the only available evidence for what psychologists call “motivated reasoning” concerns optimism regarding particular outcomes of contingent events (Krizan and Windschitl, 2007) and views of the self (Kunda 1990; John and Robins 1994), and even this evidence is limited and inconsistent.<sup>36</sup>

With the emotionalist explanation of supernatural agent beliefs in doubt, so too is Atran and Norenzayan’s attempt to address the Mickey Mouse problem. Rather than

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<sup>36</sup> Atran and Norenzayan attempt to provide evidence for the claim that supernatural agent beliefs are motivated by existential anxiety through a study of the effects of mortality salience on supernatural agent beliefs (Norenzayan and Hansen 2006). In several of these studies, participants grant more credence to the existence of supernatural agents and the efficacy of prayer after being exposed to narratives eliciting thoughts of death than other types of narratives, even after controlling for religious background and identification. Yet, there are a variety of ways to interpret such findings, including those that can account for a greater amount of the available evidence and do not involve the hypothesis that supernatural agents become believable because they could relieve anxiety about death (Navarrete et al. 2004, Navarrete and Fessler 2005).

explaining the effects of ritual participation on belief by referring to the supposed existential anxieties that such participation is thought to assuage, the evidence suggests we look elsewhere, as I will below.

The cognitive approaches to supernatural agent beliefs discussed above have frequently been labelled “byproduct” accounts of religion, in that they postulate that supernatural agent beliefs and practices are not evolved features of human cognition and behaviour, but rather the by-products of cognitive mechanisms that have evolved to serve other functions, such as producing inferences about ontological categories or attributing agency with minimal environmental input. These approaches have an advantage in that there is a significant body of evidence pointing to the existence of the cognitive mechanisms they discuss, such as HADD and TOM. As just argued, however, they have a difficult time accounting for actual belief in supernatural agents.

There is another approach that clearly sets out to explain belief in supernatural agents, though it faces its own difficulties. For several evolutionary-inclined thinkers, including Jesse Bering, Richard Sosis, William Irons and Joseph Bulbulia, the tendency to believe in the existence of supernatural agents is an adaptive feature of human cognition. These theorists posit that so many human beings believe because we, as a species, have evolved to believe. They offer what has often been labelled as an “adpatationist” account.

In chapter one, I discussed Jesse Bering’s theory of an evolved belief in the existence of social contract between the self and some supernatural agency, which evolved in order to keep our ancestors from engaging in reputation damaging behaviour. I found it to be an intriguing possibility but one without adequate evidence, given

methodological issues with Bering's studies as well as the large number of individuals I encountered through personal meetings or through my surveys who professed never to have had the "theistic intuitions" that inspired Bering's work.

For William Irons (2008), Richard Sosis (Sosis and Alcorta 2003; Purzycki and Sosis, in press), and Joseph Bulbulia (2004), both the evolutionary story and the resulting cognitive architecture are rather different from Bering's. Yet, all of these scholars hold that human beings have evolved cognitive architecture devoted to producing belief in the existence of supernatural agency. For Irons, Sosis, and Bulbulia, religious beliefs and behaviours exist because they help solve the long-standing problem of human cooperation.<sup>37</sup> They argue that human cooperation, and all of its long term benefits, requires people to limit or regulate immediate, selfish, reward-seeking behaviour and wait for the larger rewards that can only come from cooperation. Following Robert Frank (1988) who argued that emotions such as guilt and love, along with their reliable physical expression, evolved in order to suppress short term selfish behaviour and reliably signal to others that one can be trusted as a reliable cooperator, Irons, Sosis, and Bulbulia argue that religious belief and its expression through costly rituals have also evolved to encourage individuals to suppress selfishness and commit to their social group, thereby allowing these individuals to trust each other as cooperators and reap the longer term genetic benefits of cooperative group behaviour.

As Pascal Boyer and Brian Bergstrom (2008) have commented, such accounts are intriguing but need to be "supplemented with the psychological proximate causation that

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<sup>37</sup> The scope of human cooperation has long presented a puzzle to evolutionary scientists, as human beings tend to engage in genetically costly, altruistic acts that do not appear to be explicable according to the standard accounts of kin selection (Hamilton 1964) and reciprocal altruism (Trivers 1971). A variety of explanations of human altruism have been proposed and debated, such as indirect reciprocity, tribal social instincts (Richerson and Boyd 2005) and, as outlined here, the costly-signaling theory of religion.

is currently missing;” that is, while they have outlined a solution to the problem of cooperation relying on the use of religious displays as costly-signals of group commitment and trustworthiness, Irons, Sosis, and Bulbulia do not adequately explain how the belief and commitment actually come to exist and influence behaviour. Rather, than belief, they argue for an evolved *tendency to believe* (Irons 2008; Purzycki and Sosis, in press).

A more pressing problem for adaptationist accounts in the context of this thesis, however, is that there are many individuals in the world who do not believe in the existence of supernatural agents, despite the fact that nearly all of them have heard of such agents through ambient cultural discourse. If the adaptationists are correct and individuals all possess the evolved tendency to believe in the existence of supernatural agents, then this evolved tendency is not enough to produce belief, either on its own or with exposure to discourse about such agents.

## B) Explaining National Differences

The cognitive science of religion, while making a strong case for why we see certain types of agent concepts in cultures around the world, also has a difficult task in explaining the national-level differences in levels of religious belief and behaviour documented by Norris and Inglehart and others, differences that, based on my own fieldwork and survey data with non-theists from multiple countries, reflect not only differences in levels of belief in a Judaeo-Christian God but supernatural agency in general.

If Boyer, Barrett, Atran and other by-product theorists in the cognitive science of religion are correct, and nearly all human beings, as a result of their common evolutionary heritage, possess the same intuitive ontological inference systems, TOM, HADD, and the tendency to engage in promiscuous teleology, then how are we to explain the fact that such a large proportion of human beings in Sweden do not believe in the existence of supernatural agents while such a large proportion in Kenya do (Zuckerman 2007)? Similarly, if Bering, Irons, Sosis, and Bulbulia are correct, and nearly all human beings, as a result of their common evolutionary heritage, possess the tendency to believe in the existence of supernatural agents, then why do so many in Denmark find such beliefs alien and non-intuitive while so many in the United States do not?

The clear implication is that while the cognitive mechanisms identified by cognitive scientists of religion are important in explaining recurrent features of supernatural agent concepts and go some way toward explaining belief itself, something more is required to produce supernatural agent beliefs in individuals and that this “something more” varies with context.

### A Partial Answer: CREDs

So what is this “something more” that results in individuals believing in the existence of supernatural agents? What can affect belief and not just memory or inferential potential?

While it is certainly the case that a variety of phenomena can and do affect our beliefs, including the large number of biases and tendencies discussed in the social psychological and evolutionary anthropological literature on persuasion (Aronson 2007;

Richerson and Boyd 2005),<sup>38</sup> my argument here will be that one of the most crucial variables in determining whether or not an individual comes to hold supernatural agent beliefs is the degree to which that individual has been exposed to human actions, both ritualized and non-ritualized, which testify to those beliefs. This argument is based on recent work by evolutionary anthropologist Joseph Henrich (2009), who outlines both a theoretical rationale for and interdisciplinary evidence of the relevance of what he calls credibility enhancing displays, or CREDs, in influencing our beliefs. As will be outlined in more detail below, Henrich claims that the human mind exhibits a tendency to believe the claims of others to the extent that those others perform actions they would not normally perform unless they, themselves, actually believe the claims they are making. Thus, to use one of Henrich's examples, we find the proposition that blue mushrooms are not good to eat more believable when we witness the person making that proposition not gather or eat a large group of nearby blue mushrooms when hungry, or, to use an example involving supernatural agent beliefs, we find the proposition that a god exists more believable when we witness the person making that proposition take time to pray to that god and to obey rules that god is thought to enforce.

Evidence for the importance of CREDs in producing supernatural agent beliefs comes from a wide variety of sources including reflections of personal experience on the part of many theists and non-theists, literary descriptions of religious participation and conversion, traditional anthropological theory, studies in social and evolutionary psychology, and my own fieldwork experiences and survey results.

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<sup>38</sup> Richerson and Boyd (2005), for example, argue for the existence of a prestige bias in human beings in that humans tend to preferentially take on the beliefs and behaviours of more prestigious individuals within their societies.

During my field research in the United States, for instance, I met a young, self-identifying atheist from southern Illinois who related the following experience:

“So I was visiting my family for a week or so during the summer. Always an adventure going as an atheist into a very conservative Christian environment. Not a great family dynamic there. Anyway, I start getting some serious pressure from both Mom and Dad to attend a church service with them. I hadn’t been in a long time, mostly because I not only think that there’s no god or higher power but also because I’ve rejected most religious people as totalitarian fundamentalists. But I decide to go to get them off my back.

I go in very much trying to keep my distance from everyone. Just sit through the service and get out of there. But then they started doing prayer requests, and so many of them were about people who were really suffering, stories about little kids with drug-addicted mothers and no fathers getting shuffled from house to house and people who had lost their only children to a car accident. The one with the kid with the drug addict mom really hit me, as the woman who put in the request was so happy that she was going to be able to tell the little girl that someone, Jesus, loved her and cared about her in the midst of all the crap she was going through. As these prayer requests kept coming in, my opinions of lots of people started to change. I could see the heartfelt sincerity in their faces. This was not a matter of converting more people to Christianity; this was about a sincere belief that the way to ease people’s suffering was through religion. I didn’t see them as totalitarians anymore, but as people who really cared about others, even though I thought they had a wrong way of going about it.

But when they actually prayed, and we all joined hands, the strangest thing happened to me. During that prayer, reviewing all that suffering and having everyone united in the face of it, I actually had an experience of God’s (or whatever) presence. I felt the existence and presence of some supernatural being who could work in the world to actually ease that suffering, that could do something about it. For a time there, I guess I was a believer! It didn’t last very long. I noticed it and thought it was strange, and by the time I left the church and got in the car it was gone.”

This account recalls the experiences of John Grimes, the main character in James Baldwin’s mid-20<sup>th</sup> century semi-autobiographical novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953). The book describes the process by which John Grimes, a thirteen year old

African American boy living in Harlem in the 1930's, struggles against both the blackness and the puritanical Christianity of his father, until, in church at the end of the novel, he has a powerful conversion experience. Baldwin chooses to repeatedly emphasize the power of witnessing committed displays on the young and impressionable intuitions of John Grimes. Early in the novel, for instance, we are told that:

“There had never been a time when John had not sat watching the saints rejoice with terror in his heart, and wonder. Their singing caused him to believe in the presence of the Lord; indeed, it was no longer a question of belief, because they made that presence real. He did not feel it himself, the joy they felt, yet he could not doubt that it was, for them, the very bread of life—could not doubt it, that is, until it was too late to doubt. Something happened to their faces and their voices, the rhythm of their bodies, and to the air they breathed; it was as though wherever they might be became the upper room, and the Holy Ghost were riding on the air. His father's face, always awful, became more awful now; his father's daily anger was transformed into prophetic wrath. His mother, her eyes raised to heaven, hands arced before her, moving, made real for John that patience, that endurance, that long suffering, which he had read of in the Bible and found so hard to imagine.” (Baldwin 1953, 14-15)

Both of these accounts point to the importance of actions in the engendering of supernatural agent beliefs. The young Midwestern atheist stresses the looks of sincerity amongst the churchgoers as they prayed for the relief of a child's suffering in shifting his attitudes towards them and in his unexpected religious experience. The young John Grimes is said to believe in the “presence of the Lord” because of the very emotional singing, facial expressions, and bodily movements of his family and others in the church.

Besides these accounts of the power of CREDs in encouraging supernatural agent beliefs, the accounts of non-theists discussing the religious views of their parents also reveal the importance of such displays. A multitude of non-theists, in response to the prompt: “Please describe what you know or suspect about the religious beliefs of your

mother and father. If you've had little/no contact with your parents, please describe the religious beliefs of your guardian(s)", described not only the views of their parents, but also the extent to which these views were in evidence in their actions. For many non-theists, a discrepancy between the stated beliefs of their parents and their actions was a relevant enough point to include in their response.

A fifty-three year old male atheist from Texas, for instance, stated that "My mother was a Southern Baptist, but did not participate in religious activities regularly. My father calls himself a Christian, but does not read the Bible and does not attend church."

A twenty-one year old female atheist from Washington wrote: "My mother has said she is a Christian (I assume Protestant), and doesn't seem to like my Atheism, but to my knowledge, she doesn't pray, and she doesn't go to any kind of services or talk about her religion. It's hard for me to believe that she actually believes it, but she has no reason to deny it, as I suspect she's the only Christian in my immediate family."

Similarly, a thirty-seven year old male humanist from Denmark wrote that his parents were "everyday, non-practicing Lutherans," a twenty year old male atheist from Australia wrote that his parents are "non-practicing Christians, in that they believe in a Christian god but do not attend church or having any involvement with any particular denomination," and a twenty-seven year old female atheist from North Carolina described her mother as a "Christmas and Easter Christian."

Moreover, many non-theists name hypocrisy as an important element in their rejection of religious practice and supernatural agent beliefs in general. Here it is not merely a matter of a lack of exposure to CREDs but a noticeable disconnect between

word and deed that angers these future non-theists, and in several cases actually instigates their more critical appraisal of religious beliefs in general.

In response to the prompt, “Please describe how you came to be a non-theist. If you feel you have always been a non-theist, please indicate this,” for example, a fifty-four year old male Bright from the UK replied, “A build up of dissatisfaction with religious hypocrisy, followed by a considered decision of non-belief once the scientific alternative was available to me.” Similarly, a forty-four year old female atheist from New York wrote that she was “brought up a religious Jew and found the leaders to be hypocritical in every way which led to thinking about religion and how it is organized and why it is bullshit.” A thirty-one year old male Secular Humanist from Germany quipped “I’ve always been allergic to hypocrisy,” while a thirty-four year old male non-theist from the UK responded, “The hypocrisy of theists when my mother died caused me to question the founding assumptions of my belief, whereupon I realized that they were flawed.”

This common progression, from dissatisfaction with hypocrisy to an intellectual questioning of religion and eventually to non-theism is perhaps best exemplified in the answer of a thirty-seven year old male atheist from South Africa:

“When I asked where God came from, about the age of four, I was threatened and told never to ask that question. That was the first stirring of doubt. As I grew older I noticed that so many people in the congregation were hypocrites. They professed belief in God and the practices of Christianity, but behaved in ways completely antithetical to their beliefs. That prompted further doubts. Between the ages of 14 and 17 I read a number of books on economics, language, and science and I noticed the same idea cropping up: spontaneous order. You get it in laissez-faire economics. You get it in the development of language. You get it in the birth of the universe. And you get it in evolution. Belief in God at first became for me superfluous, and later contradictory.”

The idea that actions are instrumental in instilling and supporting supernatural beliefs is certainly not a new one in anthropological thought. Émile Durkheim, for instance, one of the founders of the social sciences, is well known for his discussions of “collective effervescence” in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). Working from existing field accounts of the social lives of Aboriginal Australians, Durkheim argues that a clan, through collective action, works to “awaken in its members the idea of forces existing outside them, both dominating and supporting them—in sum, religious forces” (216). Durkheim goes on to describe how periodic gatherings of Australian social groups cause increased excitation among individuals, excitation that gradually becomes amplified and climaxes with large scale ritual action and also to describe the effects of these actions on individual participants:

“Feeling possessed and led on by some sort of external power that makes him think and act differently than he normally does, he naturally feels he is no longer himself. . . . . And because his companions feel transformed in the same way at the same moment, and express this feeling by their shouts, movements, and bearing, it is as if he was in reality transported into a special world entirely different from the one in which he ordinarily lives, a special world inhabited by exceptionally intense forces that invade and transform him. Especially when repeated for weeks, day after day, how would experiences like these not leave him with the conviction that two heterogeneous and incommensurable worlds exist in fact?” (220)

“It is in these effervescent social milieu, and indeed from that very effervescence, that the religious idea seems to have been born.” (220)

It is clear from these excerpts the importance Durkheim ascribed to ritual actions in the creation of religious sentiment and beliefs within individuals. In addition, Durkheim hints that it is the specific displays of others, their “shouts, movements, and bearing,” that work in each individual to make the religious sentiments and beliefs so believable.

Since Durkheim, many anthropologists and psychologists have also argued that ritual actions have the power to create and sustain religious sentiments, beliefs, and experiences, from socio-cultural anthropologist Victor Turner's discussions of the creation of "communitas" through rituals of liminality among the Ndembu of Zambia (1969) to psychiatrists Eugene d'Aquili and Andrew Newberg's use of brain scans of Buddhist monks and Catholic nuns to argue that the rhythms of ritual performance work to lower blood flow to specific areas of the brain responsible for will, self-control, and spatial orientation, and consequently giving rise to experiences of being intimately connected with "the universe" or "God" (D'Aquili and Newberg 1999).

The link between ritual action and engendering religious belief and commitment has also been discussed by many scholars in the emerging cognitive and evolutionary study of religion. Anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse, for instance, has argued that cognitive accounts of religion focusing on how natural cognitive mechanisms give MCI-agent concepts a "cognitive optimum" in transmission and believability (Barrett 2004; Boyer 2001; Atran 2002) fail to appreciate that many aspects of religious traditions, including some supernatural beliefs (both those involving agents and those not involving agents) are not so well supported by intuitive cognitive mechanisms (Whitehouse 2004).<sup>39</sup> He argues that these beliefs and practices require both mnemonic and motivational support in order to be transmitted and offers the theory of "modes of religiosity" in order to explain how the dynamics of human memory and motivation drive

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<sup>39</sup> Whitehouse calls such beliefs and practices "cognitively costly" in opposition to "cognitively optimal." He offers the example of the Pomio Kivung movement in Papua New Guinea, which, besides containing beliefs in the existence of cognitively optimal supernatural agents like ancestors and the Christian God, also contains a large body of much more cognitively costly information about those agents' moral properties and the complex body of information concerning sinful acts which these agents, collectively known as the "Village Government," strictly enforce (Whitehouse 2004, 52-54).

the development of two modes of religiosity, the imagistic and the doctrinal, both of which utilize ritual action in order to ensure the transmission of cognitively costly beliefs and practices. In the imagistic mode, for example, infrequent but highly arousing ritual actions create enduring and vivid memories of the ritual acts themselves and encourage intense cohesion amongst co-participants, while, in the doctrinal mode, frequent ritual action and oratory help transmit bodies of detailed beliefs which are stored in semantic memory.

Further, cognitive scientist of religion Justin Barrett, who focuses mostly on the role of intuitive ontologies, HADD, TOM, and promiscuous teleology in creating and sustaining supernatural agent beliefs, has also in some instances referred to the role of “religious actions” in supporting and encouraging such beliefs. In *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (2004), for example, Barrett writes that:

“A public religious act, such as commonly occurs in the places of worship in major religions, gives visual and tangible evidence of others’ commitments. It is one thing to say that one believes in a god, but it is quite another to *act* as if one believes in a god. Such evidence of others’ commitment becomes part of the corpus of inputs that support reflective belief” (2004, 62).

This notion that beliefs gain more credence when accompanied by supporting actions is not a notion limited to scholars studying religion, culture, or psychology. In fact, given the widespread usage of such idioms as “actions speak louder than words” and “practice what you preach,”<sup>40</sup> we can easily classify it as common sense. Yet, as

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<sup>40</sup> Instances of individuals using the idiom “practice what you preach” in order to encourage consistency between professed beliefs and actions abound in everyday life in the English speaking world, from former U.S. Olympic decathlete Bruce Jenner telling parents “If you tell your kids to exercise, then you better do it too. Practice what you preach” (Jordan 1994) to a twenty-four year old “devoted Christian” relating on her online blog a story circulating around her church about a pastor whose honesty was tested when a bus driver who had recently attended one of his services intentionally gave him too much change with his bus ticket. When the preacher confessed to the driver about the mistake, the driver told him that he had heard

cognitive linguist George Lakoff writes, common sense cannot be taken for granted.

Rather, common sense is the result of a likely unconscious conceptual structure and it is exactly what the cognitive sciences have to explain (Lakoff 1996). The task, then, is to explain how this bit of common sense comes to be so common.

This task is currently underway in the work of evolutionary anthropologist Joseph Henrich, who offers an explanation for the causal relationship between action and belief in his recent writings on the cultural evolution of religion (2009). Henrich is most interested in accounting for how costly, extravagant displays such as ritual mutilation, animal sacrifice, and martyrdom can persist within populations. He argues that this persistence can best be explained as the result of an evolved cognitive tendency for humans, as cultural learners, to attend to the actions of their cultural models in order to avoid being deceived for the models' own gain. He goes on to use mathematical modelling in order to demonstrate that such a learning tendency could, under a variety of conditions, result in stable, persisting patterns of costly displays of commitment to beliefs and values and, further, to offer an account of how cultural evolution may have led to the common scenario of societies having costly ritual actions working to promote group-beneficial ideologies.

Henrich's mathematical models and cultural evolution arguments are certainly relevant for explaining the growth and persistence of costly religious practices, but in the present discussion, the crucial element of his account is the existence of an evolved tendency to attend closely to the actions of others in one's society who are propagating beliefs, behaviours, or values. He argues that a new adaptive challenge arose for human

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his sermon on honesty and wanted to see if he practiced what he preached (<http://godsmiraclegirl333.blogspot.com/> Accessed 3 May 2009).

beings with the development of language and, consequently, high fidelity cultural learning. That challenge is deception. Machiavellian-inclined manipulators can use language, which is cheap, to deceive cultural learners into adopting beliefs and practices which do not benefit the learners but rather benefit the manipulator.<sup>41</sup>

Henrich argues that human beings, in response to the problem of Machiavellian manipulators, evolved a “cultural immune system” that assesses the degree of commitment a person exhibits towards his or her communicated beliefs and preferences in his or her actions. Such a system should be especially concerned, Henrich writes, with “actions that would not be performed by a model believing something different from what the model expressed symbolically,” or, as Henrich calls them, credibility enhancing displays (CREDs).

Henrich goes on to cite a significant body of evidence from social and developmental psychology pointing to the existence of such a system in both children and adults, from evidence concerning the transmission of food consumption to opinions, to altruistic behaviour, to belief in “intangible entities.”

Behavioural scientists Harper and Sanders (1975), for instance, investigated the conditions under which children, aged fourteen to forty-eight months, would eat food offered by a person they had just met. When the person merely offered the food to the child and said “Something to eat,” only 25% of the children ate the food. When the person also ate some of the food themselves, however, 75% of the children ate the food. In this instance, the adults’ consumption of the food was a CRED for their professed belief that the item was, indeed, good to eat.

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<sup>41</sup> Henrich offers the hypothetical example of a person knowing that gray mushrooms are delicious while blue mushrooms are mildly poisonous but choosing to tell young cultural learners that “blue mushrooms taste the best” in order to preserve his or her own access to gray mushrooms.

Social psychologists Walster, Arronson, and Abrahams (1966), moreover, investigated whether or not communicators are more effective in convincing others of their opinions when they express opinions that are actually detrimental to their own self-interests. They found that, after exposing participants to testimony by felons and prosecutors concerning whether or not the courts should have more or less power to punish criminals, felons who argued that courts should have more power were more effective in persuading participants to their point of view than felons arguing that the courts should have less power. Similarly, prosecutors who argued that courts should have less power were more effective in convincing participants of their point of view than prosecutors who argued that courts should have more. In this case, as Henrich notes, the CRED is stating an opinion which goes against one's own self-interest, as it is difficult to explain why an individual would argue against his or her own interests unless he or she is quite committed to the opinion professed.

Psychologist J. Philippe Rushton (1975), along with several other researchers (Bryan, Redfield, and Mader 1971; Bryan and Walbek 1970; Rice and Grusec 1975), showed that altruistic practices are also difficult to transmit to children through exhortation alone. Rather, such behavioural transmission requires acts of altruism on the part of those professing the value of the practice. In the most widely used experimental protocol, children get to know the experimenter and then hear the experimenter explain the rules of a miniaturized bowling game. The child is shown the prizes that one can win with the tokens earned from playing well in addition to a charity jar for "poor children." The child watches as a model (not the experimenter) plays the game, with some children witnessing the model donating to the charity jar after winning and others witnessing the

model keeping his or her tokens. The child is then left to play the game on his or her own. Preaching the value of altruism has little effect on the children's donations to the charity jar, while having a model back up those exhortations with action significantly and consistently increases their donations. In this case, the model's actually donating to the jar is a CRED that works to successfully transmit the altruistic practice to the child.

In relation to intangible entities, Henrich references the work of psychologist Paul Harris and colleagues on children's judgments about existence and their reliance on testimony (Harris and Koenig 2006; Harris et al. 2006). While Harris' studies do not directly test the role of CREDs in generating beliefs in the existence of intangible entities, it does provide data consistent with this claim. Harris and his colleagues find, for example, that while children of various ages consistently endorsed the reality of intangible but "scientific" entities such as germs, they were much less sure about intangible "special" entities, such as God or the Tooth Fairy, despite all of these entities being believed in on the basis of testimony. The researchers point out that germs are referred to more consistently in everyday discourse and are frequently accompanied by behaviours such as washing hands and not eating food off of the floor, while numerous "special" entities are referred to less consistently in their relationship to everyday life. According to Henrich, such behaviours may well serve as CREDs and help explain why children within working and middle class American and British communities are likely to have more confidence in the existence of germs than Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy.

Henrich's work in formulating an evolutionary rationale for, and presenting several strands of evidence supporting the existence of, a cognitive tendency to believe the propositions of others to the extent that they "walk the walk" and not just "talk the

talk” helps explain the common sense intuition behind such phrases as “practicing what you preach” and “actions speak louder than words.” It also helps us better explain why some individuals believe in the existence of supernatural agents while others do not. It is, then, a hypothesis that can actually account for the belief in supernatural agents and the lack of belief in supernatural agents, based on an individual’s exposure to sufficient CREDs.

The claim that exposure to CREDs of the existence of supernatural agents is an important, though obviously not the sole, determinant of individual belief in the existence of such agents, of course, needs to be supported by more than field anecdotes and existing work in psychology. It needs to be supported by evidence concerning supernatural agent beliefs and practices and exposure to CREDs of those beliefs. Existing research relevant this claim, including my own survey research, provides such support.

Roger Dudley, for instance, has investigated the correlates of alienation from religion among adolescent members of the 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventist Church in the United States, as well as the correlates of their apostasy later in life through survey research (1978; 1999). In his 1978 study, Dudley constructed a variable, “alienation from religion,” through a combination of questions pertaining to the importance of religious values and whether or not the students would attend church if they were not required to do so. He found that alienation from religion was positively correlated with perceived insincerity among religious teachers ( $R=.60$ ) as well as teachers’ lack of compliance with church standards ( $R=.34$ ).

In his longitudinal study (1999), Dudley sent out surveys to the same individuals he had surveyed in the 1980's in order to investigate how the answers they gave as teenagers could predict their apostasy or lack thereof as adults (N= 783). He found that the best predictor of who would remain a member of the 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventist Church (besides a direct question of whether or not they planned to become apostates), was the church attendance of the individual's mother and father, as well as the frequency of their worshipping together as a family. From their feelings toward their religious tradition as adolescents to their decision to remain members of the tradition as adults, 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists appear to be affected in their degree of religious commitment by the presence or absence of CREDs such as sincerity and rule-following amongst their instructors and frequent church attendance and worship on the part of their parents.<sup>42</sup>

Not limiting himself to only 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists, social psychologist Bruce Hunsberger (1980, 1983) examined a university student sample in order to investigate the differences between apostates and the religious (matched on various background dimensions in order to increase the likelihood that any perceived differences were not the result of these factors). Hunsberger found little to no differences between these groups on measures of political orientation, intellectualism, academic orientation, happiness, adjustment, or rebellion against parents. He did find strong differences, however, on the degree to which religious beliefs and behaviours were emphasized in their homes and also found through a factor analysis that this degree of emphasis was one of the best predictors of apostasy, suggesting that such CREDs as frequent church attendance and discourse about the relevance of religious ideas were driving the differences.

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<sup>42</sup> Similar conclusions have been reached for those of the Catholic (Hoge 1988) and Mormon (Albrecht, Cornwall, and Cunningham 1988) traditions.

Hunsberger's early work, along with Dudley's, is suggestive. Yet, it focuses on disaffiliation vs. affiliation with a particular religious tradition, not belief in supernatural agents in general or even belief in the Christian God. Hunsberger's later work with his colleague Robert Altemeyer (2006), however, partially addresses this weakness by specifically surveying self-identifying atheists. By this time, Hunsberger has developed his early questions regarding emphasis of religion in the household into a twenty-item Religious Emphasis Scale that requires participants to answer the extent to which important people in their lives, such as parents, teachers, and church leaders emphasized certain religious beliefs, practices, and orientations. While scores on the scale could vary from 0 to 120, Hunsberger and Altemeyer found that the mean score for their San Francisco Bay Area atheist sample (N=253) was only 31.8 (SD=32.6).

This finding is not ideal in that Hunsberger and Altemeyer do not have an adequate group of theists with which to compare the atheists. They do refer, however, to an additional study among adults in Manitoba involving a shorter version of the Religious Emphasis Scale that finds strong differences between the theists and atheists. Moreover, I included a modified version of Hunsberger and Altemeyer's Religious Emphasis Scale in my surveys for both theists and non-theists and found pronounced differences between theists (M= 50.52) and non-theists (M= 34.26) ( $t = -2.56$ ,  $df = 1883$ ,  $p = .01$ ).<sup>43</sup>

Hunsberger and Altemeyer argue that the main explanatory factor in whether or not an individual becomes a theist or an atheist is the level to which religion was emphasized to an individual while growing up, a factor they measure by such questions

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<sup>43</sup> The Religious Emphasis Scale required modification for an international survey because of its strongly Christian wording, which included such questions as, "To what extent did the important people in your life stress that it was your responsibility to fight Satan all your life?" Both the original Religious Emphasis Scale and my own modification can be found in Appendix C.

as “To what extent did the important people in your life—such as your parents, teachers, and church officials (if any): a) emphasize attending religious services as acts of personal devotion, b) encourage you to make religion the centre, the most important part of your life, and c) tell you how wrong it was to sin against a loving God?” (2006, 43). Yet, given the frequent references to hypocrisy among non-theists as being an important element of their becoming non-theists, “emphasis” is most likely an insufficient explanatory variable. Having parents, church officials, or teachers constantly emphasize religious teachings and rules and values while not practicing them themselves may very well result in anger at such hypocrisy and, as in the cases of the non-theists mentioned earlier, a closer examination at the intellectual basis of religious claims and a loss of belief in the existence of the relevant supernatural agent concepts.

Despite this weakness in the Religious Emphasis construct, the scale can serve as a proxy for exposure to CREDs for those individuals whose parents and other authority figures were not hypocritical in their emphasizing of these beliefs, practices, and values. Taking the time and energy to continually emphasize and encourage religious attendance, prayer, moral choices, and religious study within the home is certainly a CRED for belief in God. In the absence of other actions which would work to discredit them, such as the parents or teachers routinely missing religious services, the various questions in the Religious Emphasis Scale may serve as questions about CREDs.

My own survey research regarding CREDs involves creating a specific measure for exposure to CREDs of belief in supernatural agents and investigating any possible differences between non-theists and theists in their degree of exposure to such displays. I asked both non-theists and theists one set of questions regarding such actions on the part

of their parents or guardians and another set of questions regarding such actions on the part of leaders and members of any religious congregations, groups, or camps in which they had participated. Each individual was able to provide data on up to two different religious groups and, for those who did provide data for two groups, the scores for each group were averaged together to form a Group CRED exposure score. For all participants, this Group CRED score was added to the Parent CRED score to create the final variable for Total CRED Exposure.<sup>44</sup> The difference between non-theists (classified by their self-identifying as atheist, non-theist, agnostic, humanist, or bright) and theists (classified by their self-identifying as theists, Christians, Jews, or Muslims) on Total CRED Exposure was both significant and substantial (Non-theist mean score= 10.43, SD= 11.56, Theist mean score= 20.21, SD=12.95,  $t = -4.36$ ,  $df = 672$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

The combined evidence from the testimonies of atheists and theists, the experimental literature in social psychology, and survey data collected from both church members and apostates, theists and atheists, strongly suggests that exposure to credibility enhancing displays for belief in some supernatural agent is an important factor in determining whether or not an individual believes in the existence of said agent. Yet, specifically designed experimental studies still need to be conducted to test this hypothesis and to rule out any confounding variables that may be affecting the data presented above.

Even in the absence of such controlled studies, the evidence for the importance of CREDs appears strong, suggesting that without sufficient exposure to the necessary CREDs, supernatural agent concepts such as gods, ghosts, and ancestors are no more

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<sup>44</sup> The specific questions asked and procedures followed to obtain these scores, as well as graphical representations of the results, can be found in appendix D.

believed in than fictional, but minimally counter-intuitive agents such as Mickey Mouse, Superman, or characters from the Grimm brother's collections. Indeed, for several non-theists with minimal exposure to CREDEs as they grew up, this similarity between religious concepts and fairy-tales was salient enough to mention while answering other questions. A 78 year old Humanist from California, for example, stated, "No early religious training. Mother read me fairytales from age 3. When my religious aunt gave me a child's bible at 7, I loved it because it was just one more wonderful book of mythology." Similarly, a 19 year old atheist from Denmark stated, "I have never had any belief in the existence of God or gods. When I was told stories of the bible as a child I categorized them with other fairy tales."

## Chapter 4. Explaining Non-theism

Given the above discussion of explaining beliefs in the existence of supernatural agents, the problems facing numerous existing explanations, and the limited but very suggestive evidence for the important role of witnessing CREDs in generating such beliefs, we can better evaluate existing explanations for the existence and distribution of non-theism.

### Rationality, the “Conditions of Belief,” and Socialization

The idea of “explaining non-theism,” not surprisingly, is often greeted with scepticism and, more rarely, hostility among many non-theists who hold a view of the human mind as fundamentally rational. For these individuals, non-theism requires no explanation beyond the proper use of human reasoning faculties and their own non-theism is explained very simply as the result of their own rational thought. One American atheist, for example, in response to the prompt, “Please describe how you came to be a non-theist,” wrote simply “Logic.” Another non-theist, an agnostic from South Africa, stated that she “Grew out of it as [she] learned more information, and became sceptical.” A more thorough non-theist replied: “I began to have irresolvable problems and unanswered questions with the religion in which I was raised. First, I spent about a year seeking answers to the questions I had about religion. When the answers I got were uninformative or unimpressive, I began to doubt and began deconstructing and reconstructing my personal philosophy deliberating avoiding contradiction.”

This view that non-theism results primarily as the result of simple rational thought can be seen in a variety of other contexts as well. The New York City Atheists organization, for instance, in an effort to differentiate themselves from “believers,” who

are thought to come to their position through faith rather than reason and evidence, have been placing the phrase “Atheism is a Conclusion Not a Belief” on their monthly newsletters for the last several years. I encountered this view continuously during my field research with atheist and humanist organizations in the US and the UK, including an atheist “testimonial” at a multi-group gathering in St. Louis. Individuals at the meeting, which took place at a locally run coffee house, were invited to take the microphone and share their story of how they became atheists or agnostics with the thirty other attendees. After completing his testimonial, one young man was asked point blank by one of the attendees, “So are you liberated from the old dogma, now? Are you thinking rationally?”<sup>45</sup>

Yet, as we saw in the previous chapter, the view that human cognition operates according to the principles of normative rationality, such as non-contradiction and optimization, has been thoroughly discredited by decades of research in the cognitive sciences. This is not to say that conscious reasoning, even according to the rules of normative rationality, is an impossible feat for human beings or that such conscious reasoning according to such rules has not played a part in the journey of many individuals from theism to non-theism. Hundreds of individuals, for example, told me that reading science and philosophy was crucial to their changing views and, in response to my survey question: “What description best describes your move to atheism/agnosticism: a) Not Applicable, b) A natural process that I did not really need to think that much about, c) An intellectual struggle to figure out what I should believe, d) Other (please specify), over

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<sup>45</sup> The view that non-theism is the result of rational thought is not universal among non-theists, however. Michael Shermer, editor of *Skeptic* magazine, argued in a round-table discussion for a television program about the impact of Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis on modern thought on religion that we come to all or at least most of our beliefs for non-rational reasons, which we then attempt to justify after the fact (PBS 2004).

30% of my participants answer c) An intellectual struggle. It is to say, however, that the reasoning processes individuals engage in are not best described as solely a matter of the use of an innate faculty of rationality and that a whole host of influences, from the operations of numerous evolved cognitive mechanisms to internalized social understandings, are operating within an individual mind when considering such questions.<sup>46</sup> It is also not to say that thinking in a relatively more rational way is somehow impossible, but to say that such thinking is not merely the result of a heroic individual human mind freeing itself of outside constraints. Rather, individuals can think more rationally when provided the explicit tools and rules of rationality, which have consistently shown themselves to result in fruitful pragmatic outcomes, and the motivation to adhere to those rules, which can arise from a variety of sources, including socio-cultural environments that stress the desirability of such adherence. Thus, if we are to take seriously the claim that rational thought has a role in explaining many individuals' lack of belief in supernatural agents, we must also describe the socio-cultural environments that provide both the explicit trappings of rationality in the form of arguments and rules as well as the motivation to adhere to these trappings.

This is precisely the task social philosopher Charles Taylor sets for himself in *A Secular Age* (2007), to counter what he calls the “subtraction story” of modernity and religion (that story being that religious belief was subtracted from our worldview simply because of the advance of science and enlightenment Reason) with an alternative story concerning the background “conditions for belief” and motivations that work to influence

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<sup>46</sup> The view of many non-theists, however, is precisely that there exists a rational faculty somehow beyond the reach of such influences.

thought on matters of supernatural agency (2007).<sup>47</sup> Taylor argues that widespread non-theism was virtually impossible before a “self-sufficient humanism,” in which notions of the “highest human good” could be conceived without any transcendent referent or goal. Ironically enough, Taylor argues, such a self-sufficient humanism was largely a product of religious initiatives. In an effort to bridge the divide between elite and popular Christianity, Taylor argues, the numerous personalities involved in the Reformation worked to not only disenchant the world but to re-order society, as seen in the Calvinist projects. This re-ordering of society, manifest in the sets of moral demands made on individuals engaged in commercial and subsistence lifestyles, was furthered by the realization among governments that a well-ordered state becomes a more productive state and, as a result, the rise of the “disciplinary society.”

Referring to the writings of Justus Lipsius (1547-1606), who advocated a form of Christian Stoicism, as well as the political writings of Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) and John Locke (1632-1704), Taylor outlines how “Reason” began to become privileged as a method by which to order both life and society for the betterment of all, that is, to create a “system of mutual benefit.” God was still seen as important in these accounts, as he was seen as the provider of Reason to humanity. Yet doing the will of God became not a matter of pursuing a transcendent goal but an immanent one, the remaking of society from a collective under divinely-sanctioned authority to a system of mutual benefit for individuals according to the dictates of Reason.

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<sup>47</sup> Taylor offers this alternative account because he sees the arguments normally given for not believing in God as inconclusive. Taylor argues that, given the openness of the question of the existence of God and the weakness of the arguments against his existence, the fact that large numbers of people do indeed reject the existence of God must emerge from the moral standpoint from which individuals are evaluating the question.

Taylor argues that, through the “halfway house” of deism and the growing moral stance against religious enthusiasm, which resulted from the realization that religious groups with goals beyond human flourishing in the system of mutual benefit could actually harm that system, a new humanism arose. In this new humanism, conceptions of the human good, in this case the further development of the system of mutual benefit for rational individuals, became separate from any transcendent goals or references.

Taylor outlines various “trajectories” of this new humanism and the religious thinkers who established dialogues with it throughout the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, all of which worked to help create the “conditions of belief” from which individuals make their conclusions about the existence of supernatural agencies or, as Taylor prefers to emphasize, “transcendent realities.” He draws special attention to the growing association of religious beliefs with immaturity and sentimentality during the Victorian era, most notably in the writings of John Stewart Mill (1806-1873) and Leslie Stephens (1832-1904). Taylor notes that while this attitude can be traced to earlier Christian Stoicism and through the “muscular Christianity” and broader Evangelical movements of the time in its emphasis on resisting temptation in the name of duty, it became secularized through the replacement of God with natural beauty. Further, Christian belief came to be seen by many as weak in that an individual seemed to be working for transcendent rewards rather than being motivated by a true ethical stance (Taylor 2007).

By analyzing the origins of the notion of a system for mutual benefit as well as the moral stance that religious belief betrayed an inner weakness of character, Taylor argues that he has laid bare the background conditions of belief, that is, the set of moral assumptions that have lead many individuals to reject transcendent goals and beliefs in

the existence of supernatural agencies. For Taylor, when Victorians heard the arguments of Charles Darwin concerning evolution and the use of these arguments to reject belief in God, they did not evaluate these arguments on the basis of a disembodied Reason but rather through their moral standpoints concerning the proper place of rational thought and religious enthusiasm in society and the status of religious beliefs as signs of weakness and the inability to “look facts in the face” (Taylor 2007). For Taylor, it is not so much that science and rationality simply make beliefs in supernatural agents obsolete as ways of understanding the world but that a whole new standpoint emerged from which individuals addressed questions of science and the supernatural, and this standpoint emerged not from a history-free, rational human nature but from a particular set of historical circumstances rooted in trajectories of the Christian tradition.

Taylor’s account is certainly a helpful corrective to secularization narratives matching what Taylor calls the subtraction story. Human decision making and evaluation, as we have seen, is very rarely, if ever, a simple product of “rational” thought. Rather, a whole host of unconscious influences, from the outputs of the universal cognitive mechanisms outlined by cognitive scientists to socially transmitted values concerning the moral status of supernatural agent beliefs, work to give rise to our judgments of what is the case.

Where Taylor’s account is less helpful, however, is in accounting for the wide differences we find in levels of religious belief and practice among different nations in the West. If, as Taylor argues, all of these Western nations have entered the “secular age,” and the growth of non-theism is to be explained by the presence of the background

conditions of belief Taylor has identified, then how are we to account for the differences between Sweden and Denmark on the one hand, and the United States on the other?

Disappointingly, Taylor does not devote very much space at all to this question and does not at all engage with the findings of Norris and Inglehart (2004) or Gill and Lundsgaarde (2004) concerning the role of state welfare spending and human security on levels of religiosity. Rather, Taylor briefly speculates that Americans have not rejected religion to the same extent that Europeans have because they still believe God to be on their side and then admits that such a speculation is a mere “stab in the dark” at one of the most important questions concerning secularization (2007, 528-530). This speculation faces several problems, from its lack of engagement with the available evidence on the role of social welfare to its unsupported psychological assumption that supernatural agent beliefs are sustained only to the extent that they produce practical results.

The conditions of belief Taylor describes, then, do not seem to be sufficient for producing widespread non-theism, though, if one accepts Taylor’s argument that narratives of “transcendence” and not supernatural agent beliefs are the phenomena of interest, then the conditions he outlines may well be necessary.

Taylor’s account is a unique version of a broader socialization account of non-theism, unique in that the socialization on which Taylor focuses is not a matter of explicit instruction in a particular set of ideas but rather a matter of the socio-cultural environment in the West working beneath the level of consciousness to give individuals a particular experience of themselves and their social world, an experience they bring with them when evaluating particular claims. Still, non-theism, for Taylor, is largely a product of social learning.

Hunsberger and Altemeyer's account (2006) of the importance of the explicit emphasis placed on religious beliefs and practices during individuals' formative years is also within this broad notion that non-theism, like theism, is largely a product of socialization. Several problems face this approach, as outlined above: 1) socialization alone cannot account for the national differences in religiosity outlined by sociologists, 2) its view of the mind as largely a blank slate upon which societies can inscribe has been rendered untenable by work in cognitive and developmental psychology, and 3) *emphasis*, the key variable of Hunsberger and Altemeyer's simple socialization account, does not adequately deal with the variable of hypocrisy; numerous encounters in my fieldwork and answers to my survey questions clearly show, for instance, that growing up in an environment in which religious beliefs and practices are verbally emphasized or "preached" but not adequately practiced is likely to result in accusations of hypocrisy and a rejection of the particular beliefs being emphasized.

### CSR and Non-theism

Above, I discussed the cognitive science of religion as an intriguing way forward in explaining certain features of supernatural agent beliefs, such as why so many of these beliefs involved minimally counter-intuitive agents rather than other kinds of agents. Yet, I also argued that neither belief itself, in opposition to a lack of belief, nor the national level differences in religiosity documented by sociologists, had adequately been addressed by discussions of aggregate relevance and the operations of universal cognitive mechanisms.

While these criticisms hold for the field as a whole for its now nearly twenty-year history, they fail to acknowledge some recent work in CSR seeking to address precisely these issues. Justin Barrett, for instance, in his 2004 book, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?*, after spending several chapters outlining the cognitive argument that supernatural agent beliefs are mostly natural products of our maturationally natural cognitive mechanisms (McCauley, in press),<sup>48</sup> devotes an entire chapter to the question, “Why Would Anyone Not Believe in God?” In addition, anthropologist of religion Benson Saler, along with Charles Ziegler, has followed Barrett’s lead in arguing for a particular cognitive explanation of differences in levels of theism and non-theism around the world (2006).

Barrett argues that while non-theism is difficult to sustain in human minds because it goes against the outputs of our HADD, our sense of moral realism, and our tendency to engage in promiscuous teleology, it can be sustained through a variety of “strategies.” The strategy to which Barrett devotes the most attention, and the strategy that Saler and Ziegler take as the heart of Barrett’s argument, is the strategy of reducing HADD experiences by 1) lowering the level of urgency in the environment (such as by increasing wealth and security), thereby making our agency detectors less vigilant, and 2) creating an environment in which nearly everything is the product of human agency, thereby leaving little room for unexplained experiences that can be interpreted as the work of supernatural agents (Barrett 2004, 113-116).<sup>49</sup> For Barrett, all of the relevant

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<sup>48</sup> Seeking to avoid the issues revolving around the concept of “innateness,” McCauley employs the term “maturational naturalness” to designate those cognitive mechanisms that are produced through the combination of our common genetic endowment and typical exposure to regular features of the world (in press).

<sup>49</sup> Recall the earlier discussion in which Barrett’s ideas were presented regarding the important role of our HADD in generating and supporting supernatural agent beliefs, as many HADD experiences cannot be

strategies have been implemented in large Western cities since the end of World War II and it is, consequently, in large, affluent, urban areas that we see the highest proportion of non-theists.

Barrett's account of the lowering of the HADD's outputs in modern, urban environments has also been extended by Saler and Ziegler (2006), who are in broad agreement with Barrett on the crucial role of agency detection dynamics in explaining theism and non-theism. They contest, however, the notion that everyone's HADD is equally sensitive and that the differences between people are mostly the result of the environment in which each person's HADD operates. Rather, they present evidence from behavioural genetics suggesting that a certain degree of religiosity or "intrinsic religiousness" is heritable, as well as evidence that one of the possible mechanisms of this heritability is a specific allele for a gene involved in the transportation and function of the neurotransmitter serotonin. Bearers of this particular allele are much more likely, the evidence suggests, to exhibit anxiety-related behaviours throughout adult life. For Saler and Zeigler, these anxious individuals would have more sensitive HADDs than those who do not possess this allele and would, consequently, have more HADD experiences and be more likely to believe in the existence of supernatural agents.

Much interesting and relevant work on this account remains to be done, such as both laboratory and more naturalistic studies of the role of urgency and anxiety on interpreting events in the environment as being caused by some unseen agency. Yet, the existing evidence suggesting that HADD dynamics are a crucial explanatory variable in explaining theism and non-theism is weak. Gill and Lundsgaarde (2004), for example, in

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dismissed through naturalistic explanations, supernatural agent concepts cannot be dismissed, and the credence level given to such concepts increases.

their cross-national analysis of the predictors of national levels of religiosity, found that state welfare spending, rather than urbanization, was the crucial factor driving the results; the greater a nation spent per capita on welfare spending, the less religiosity their populations exhibit.

Moreover, I created a variable for “exposure to the outdoors” in my survey for theists and non-theists, where I asked whether the individual grew up in a rural, suburban, or urban setting (or some combination thereof) as well as how frequently they engaged in outdoor activities in environments with relatively fewer signs of human artefacts (such as hiking, hunting, and fishing). If Barrett, Saler, and Zeigler are correct that those individuals with more exposure to the natural world and non-human agency are more likely to find supernatural agent concepts compelling because of the greater opportunity for HADD experiences, then we might find a difference between theists and non-theists in their degree of exposure to the natural world, similar to the difference I found between theists and non-theists in their degree of exposure to CREDs. I found no such difference (Non-theist  $M= 6.01$ , Theist  $M= 5.61$ ,  $t= .937$ ,  $df= 1810$ ,  $p= .349$ ).

Both Gill and Lundsgaarde’s evidence and my own cast doubt on the idea that exposure to the natural world and its opportunities for HADD experiences is a crucial driver of supernatural agent beliefs and, conversely, that lack of such exposure is a crucial driver of non-theism. This does not rule out the possibility that HADD experiences are important in supporting supernatural agent beliefs or even that variation between individuals in the number of such experiences can help explain theism vs. non-theism. It merely suggests that if something is driving HADD experiences, it is most likely not mere exposure to non-humanly engineered environments.

## Secularization and its Critics

One might expect that the writings of scholars specifically concerning secularization would contain a wealth of claims about the causes of non-theism and even strong atheism. One would, however, be disappointed. For while it is the case that many secularization theorists such as Berger (1967), Bruce (2002), Martin (2005), and Wilson (1966, 1982) discuss the issue of belief and disbelief in God and even supernatural agents at an individual level, it is by no means the main focus of their investigations. Wilson summarizes the larger concerns of secularization theory quite clearly when he writes:

“...by the term secularization, I mean that process by which religious institutions, actions, and consciousness, lose their social significance. What such a definition does not imply is that all men have acquired a secularized consciousness. It does not even suggest that most individuals have relinquished all their interesting religion, even though that may be the case. It maintains no more than that religion ceases to be significant in the working of the social system. (Wilson 1982, 149-150)

Much work in secularization theory, then, concerns the process of religion's separation from the public sphere and social action and utilizes Max Weber's work on rationalization and disenchantment (1918), Ferdinand Tönnies distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (1887), and Wilson's concept of societalization (1966). Less work concerns the process by which supernatural agent beliefs become less convincing to individuals. The work that does concern individual belief consists mostly of two claims: 1) pluralism breeds scepticism about supernatural beliefs, and 2) the development of a rational, scientific view of causality makes religious beliefs less relevant and, consequently, less believable.

Both Steve Bruce and Peter Berger discuss the role of pluralism, religious and otherwise, in generating scepticism towards religious ideas. Bruce, for instance, writes of “the social-psychological consequences of increasing diversity” arguing that, “it calls into question the certainty that believers can accord their religion. Ideas are most convincing when they are universally shared. Then they are not beliefs at all; they are just an accurate account of how things are. The elaboration of alternatives provides a profound challenge” (Bruce 2002, 17-18). Similarly, Berger views religion as a humanly meaningful conception of the universe, the “sacred canopy,” and as vulnerable to pluralism, which undermines the sensation that these meaningful conceptions are just the way the world is, rather than a choice among many choices (1967).

Berger, Bruce, Martin, and Wilson all discuss Weber’s notion of rationalization of social action as well as the growth science and technology, though none of them, as they are frequently accused of doing (Stark 1999), view science as a main cause of secularization at the social or individual level. Rather, the argument is that rational and scientific approaches to problems of economic production and health make religious approaches to such problems extraneous, less frequently utilized, and, consequently, less believable. These arguments assume that the less frequently an idea can be utilized in interpreting the world, the less credence one is likely to give to it. As Bruce has written, it is not that science and technology create atheists. Rather, “they just tend to reduce the frequency and seriousness with which people tend to religion” (2002, 27). And similarly, Martin states that, with the development of science and technology, “the general sense of human power is increased, the play of contingency is restricted and the overwhelming

sense of divine limits which afflicted previous generations is much diminished” (1969, 116).

Both of these hypotheses face significant problems as explanations for non-theism. For instance, neither claim is evaluated by their proponents either psychologically or sociologically.<sup>50</sup> That is, these claims are not tested against literatures in either psychology or sociology and, consequently, we have no evidence for these claims besides their originators’ intuitions. Further, if some evidence did indeed support these claims, we would still be left with the fact that some significant degree of technology and religious pluralism exists throughout the West while widely divergent levels of supernatural agent beliefs and practices exist between nations. The clear implication is that these factors cannot explain the variation we see.

For Rodney Stark and his colleagues, no evidence exists to support such hypotheses because no real and enduring “secularization of consciousness” has occurred. For Stark, human nature itself prevents any enduring secularization of consciousness and the cross-national and longitudinal evidence concerning religious belief and practice frequently cited by secularization theorists is actually evidence of the value of free-market competition between religious ideas in generating greater religious commitment. Yet, both Stark’s view of human nature and his interpretation of existing evidence have proven very problematic, casting doubt on his denial of the possibility of the growth of an enduring non-theism or “secularized consciousness.”

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<sup>50</sup> Interestingly enough, Rodney Stark and his colleagues (1987, 1999, 2000), as will be examined below, take pluralism to be an important component of religious vitality rather than scepticism. For these sociologists, pluralism encourages competition and, consequently, a better religious “product” that people are more likely to accept. The methodological foundations for their claim that nations with higher degrees of religious pluralism exhibit greater religiosity have been questioned by a number of scholars, but none of the available evidence supports the notion that nations with higher degrees of religious pluralism exhibit more religious scepticism.

For Stark and others in the field that has come to be known as the economics of religion or the “new paradigm” in the sociology of religion, the human mind is rational. That is, similar to long-standing models of human rationality in the field of economics, Stark and colleagues argue that human minds seek the maximal attainment of rewards and the avoidance of costs within the limits of their knowledge (Stark and Bainbridge 1987; Iannaccone 1998; Stark 1999; Stark and Finke 2000). This rational mind faces a problem, however, in that many of the rewards it seeks, especially immortality, cannot be satisfied in this world. According to the “rational choice” model of religion, human minds rationally accept “compensators” rather than rewards in such circumstances, compensators being “postulations of reward according to explanations that are not readily susceptible to unambiguous evaluation” (Stark and Bainbridge 1987, 36). For Stark and his colleagues, many compensators can only be supported by supernatural explanations, including supernatural agents, making religion a “system of general compensators based on supernatural assumptions” (1987, 39).

Given that the human demand for rewards such as immortality and meaning is constant and such rewards are unattainable in this world, Stark and others surmise that religious explanations of the universe, usually involving supernatural agents, and of how to attain such rewards, will always be in demand. Consequently, any seeming “secularization of consciousness” is ephemeral and “self-limiting,” as the more sceptical people become of a particular religious tradition, the more demand there is for a more convincing religious tradition that can satisfy their never-ending desire for immortality.

With this view of human nature, scholars in the economics of religion offer a unique interpretation of the cross-national differences in levels of religious belief and

practice. Specifically they argue that such differences can be explained by the different degrees of religious pluralism and regulation present (Finke and Stark 1998; Iannaccone 1998). Taking a cue from free-market economics, these scholars argue that free-market competition helps create better products, in this case religious compensators that are plausible to people in a given context. In countries with a high degree of religious pluralism and a low degree of government interference in religion (such as the United States), these scholars predict a high degree of religious vitality, as the various religions compete with one another in creating the best religious product.

For Stark and his colleagues, then, cross-national differences in religious belief and behaviour are by no means an indicator of lower demand for religious explanations and compensators; it is not that people are somehow becoming less religious and more sceptical. Rather, in environments with low pluralism and high government regulations (and consequently little competition), the religious products available from existing organizations are unsatisfying. Individuals in these circumstances supposedly construct their own religious ideas or exhibit a latent demand that, given the right religious product, would blossom into religious adherence. According to Stark and his colleagues, then, the citizens of Denmark and Sweden, two countries with high proportions of non-theists, still have a demand for religious compensators and, if given the “right” religion through a process of free-market religious competition, would once again become religious adherents, engage in religious practices, and believe in the supernatural.

The rational choice view of religion is, unfortunately, beset with problems in both its view of human cognition and its interpretation of cross-national data regarding religious vitality and pluralism.

First, as has been discussed above, evidence from several disciplines within the cognitive sciences discredits the notion that human cognition operates according to normatively rational principles or that it seeks to maximize individual gain. That is, no evidence exists to support the idea, common to traditional economic theory, that the human mind necessarily seeks to maximize rewards and to minimize costs.

Stark has attempted to acknowledge such literatures by reframing his concept of rationality as “bounded rationality,” a newer and indeed fruitful model of human decision making (Gigerenzer and Selten 2001). Stark argues that human minds may not be perfectly rational and constant maximizers of utility, but rather that “within the limits of their information and understanding, restricted by available options, guided by their preferences and tastes, humans attempt to make rational choices” (Stark 1999, 266).

Such a characterization, however, is a fundamental misunderstanding of bounded rationality. Despite citing one of the founders of research on bounded rationality, Herbert Simon, Stark fails to acknowledge that Simon has explicitly rejected the very conceptualization of rationality that Stark proposes, which Simon and many others have labelled “optimization under constraints.” Theoretically, such an account adds to the problems presented by ideal rationality rather than solving them, as the rational mind now has to determine what is most rational given all of the constraints involved in a given situation (Gigerenzer and Todd 1999). Moreover, the evidence does not support such an “optimization under constraints” notion of rationality but rather the notion of bounded rationality as used in experimental economics and cognitive science, which involves the operation of numerous heuristics that work well enough for the purposes of the organism but do not utilize normatively rational rules.

Second, the rational choice account of religious belief suffers the same problems as all emotionalist theories of religion. According to Stark and Bainbridge, people “accept religious compensators,” or, in other words, they believe in the supernatural, because such beliefs meet their deep demands for immortality and meaning. The problem with this, as discussed above, is that there is no evidence for the common intuition that human beings find propositions believable because they are comforting or desirable.

Thirdly, despite the attempts of economists of religion to show a correlation between religious pluralism and religious vitality (Finke, Guest, and Stark 1996; Finke and Stark 1988; Iannaccone 1991), most studies of the relationship between pluralism and vitality yield either a negative relationship or no relationship at all, whether the unit of analysis is a single city or an entire country (Chaves and Gorski 2001).

And finally, given Zuckerman’s (2008) and my own discussions with Scandinavians, there is little evidence to support the claim that large numbers of non-theistic and non-practicing Scandinavians would become theistic and begin religious participation if there were only “better” religious products available. Neither of us found evidence for a latent religiosity beneath the surface of Danish non-theism, which might blossom into full-fledged religious belief and practice. As Zuckerman writes in response to a Danish bishop who argues that Danish religion is like a lottery ticket in that you do not see it on the surface but, with a little scratching, the religious heart of the people is revealed: “I spent a year scratching. I scratched and I scratched and I scratched. And what I found was that religion wasn’t really so much a private, personal issue, but rather a non-issue” (2008, 102). And while both Zuckerman and I ran across explicitly non-

theistic Danes who quoted Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in conversation, admitting that "there's more between heaven and earth," this was by no means the majority.

Despite these problems with rational choice theory, William Sims Bainbridge, who helped formulate the theory with Rodney Stark in the 1980's, has recently used it, somewhat counter-intuitively, as part of an explanation for atheism (defined by Bainbridge as self-identifying as an atheist) (2005). For Bainbridge, the key to expanding the theory to account not only for theism and religious participation but for atheism involves a distinction between two types of compensation, as understood by the rational choice theory of rewards, costs, and compensators. Bainbridge argues that there is both *primary compensation*, in which a compensator is accepted in place of a reward that people want themselves and *secondary compensation*, in which a compensator is accepted in place of a reward that a person is obligated to provide to another person.

For Bainbridge, individuals with numerous social obligations, such as close relationships with parents, several siblings, a marriage, and children, are much less likely to be atheists, as they will feel a strong need to be able to comfort and provide meaning for these individuals in times of need. Bainbridge, for instance, recalls his great-grandmother singing religious hymns to her brother as he died of typhoid over a period of weeks, assuring him of the reality of the rewards/compensators of heaven. Differences in social obligations, Bainbridge argues, constitute differences in the need for secondary compensation and, consequently, can help explain atheism. Bainbridge supports this argument with data from a large (N> 10,000), multi-language, but still non-representative survey showing that individuals with fewer social obligations (as measured by their marital status, number of children, their level of desire to participate in a large family

reunion, and how long they had lived at their current home) are more likely to call themselves atheists. He also shows that, among the eleven nations included in the survey, nations with higher fertility rates (and consequently more social obligations) have a lower percentage of atheists.

This explanation of atheism faces the same problems as its related explanation of religion, namely that there is no evidence for either the rational choice view of the mind that underlies the logic of rewards and compensators and that there is no evidence for the fact that the human mind believes in rewarding or compensatory explanations because of their being rewarding or compensatory. Moreover, the data Bainbridge presents only show differences but do not establish causes. It is quite possible, for instance, that Norris and Inglehart's theory of existential security leading to lower religiosity and, consequently, higher levels of non-theism can account for these data, as higher levels of wealth in a country, as measured by per capita GDP, are thought to negatively influence fertility rates (Weil 2004). Thus, the same set of causes, increased wealth and existential security, may well be causing both lower levels of fertility and higher levels of non-theism.

But what about Norris and Inglehart's theory of existential security and religiosity? The cross-national data presented by Norris and Inglehart as well as Gill and Lundsgaarde strongly suggest that a variety of factors having to do with "existential security," or the absence of physical, social, and personal threats, have a significant correlation with religious belief and practice. The less people are worried about the

welfare of themselves and their loved ones, it seems, the less likely they are to attend religious services and express beliefs in the existence of God.<sup>51</sup>

Yet, Norris and Inglehart's theory is underpinned by untested and problematic psychological assumptions. They argue that "virtually all" religious cultures provide reassurance that some higher power will "ensure that things work out," and that, by believing in such ideas, individuals enjoy the benefits of reduced stress and anxiety and can better focus on addressing their immediate situations (2004, 19). They argue that, since individuals differ in the extent that they suffer from insecurity as they are growing up, they should differ in the extent that they need the reassurance provided by religions. Consequently, those growing up in secure environments should place less value on and show less belief in religious representations of the world, while those growing up in more insecure environments should place greater value on these representations.

This is yet another example of the emotionalist theory of supernatural beliefs that stipulates that human beings believe in the existence of supernatural agents and forces because of their being comforting and enriching. It is, once again, contradicted both by a plethora of societies in very existentially insecure nations, including numerous Sub-Saharan African and Melanesian nations, which exhibit very high degrees of religiosity but profess beliefs in vengeful ancestors and witchcraft, as well as by numerous psychological studies demonstrating little evidence for the claim that human beings believe propositions because they find them comforting or anxiety reducing.

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<sup>51</sup> While it is important to note that the survey data employed by Norris and Inglehart and Gill and Lundsgaarde to ascertain religious belief involve only "God" and not any and all supernatural agents, both my survey data and fieldwork experiences, as well as those of sociologist Phil Zuckerman, suggest that a significant though undetermined portion of non-believers in "God" also lack belief in the existence of other supernatural agencies.

## Moving Forward

Yet, if the sociological data concerning existential security, welfare spending, and religiosity is accurate and the comfort hypothesis explaining the correlation between insecurity and religiosity is mistaken, how are we to account for this correlation? What is the psychological process by which environmental conditions characterized as existentially secure work to make religious beliefs and practices less compelling to so many people? What is it about insecure environments that keeps participation in religious coalitions and belief in supernatural agents so strong?

Above, I argued for the importance of exposure to CREDs of belief in the existence of supernatural agents and forces in determining whether or not an individual comes to believe in the existence of these agents and forces. And while CREDs may at first seem to be unrelated to the matter of existential security and religiosity, I will argue that it is precisely at the centre of their relationship.

Those believing in supernatural agents, I argue, do not engage in CREDs simply to the extent that others in their society are engaged in them or to the extent that important individuals in their lives while they were growing up engaged in them. Rather, as will be detailed in the next chapter, the extent to which individual believers engage in CREDs is significantly affected by environmental variables affecting their degree of commitment to their beliefs as well as their participation in religious activities that constitute CREDs. If an individual believer becomes less committed to his or her beliefs (that they still hold) and if an individual believer becomes less likely to engage in religious activities that constitute CREDs, then fewer CREDs will be performed in that individual's environment, thereby reducing the credibility of these beliefs to young observers.

Consequently, if an environment works to lower commitment to beliefs and to lower ritual participation, then this environment will lower the amount of CREDs and, obviously, exposure to CREDs by individuals as they are growing up. I will argue that such an environment, over the span of one to two generations, will exhibit significantly higher levels of non-theism.

Below, I will argue that existentially secure environments, as described by Norris and Inglehart, do not lower religiosity by making the comforts of religious belief and practice less needed. Rather, existentially secure environments lower the levels of commitment believers have in their beliefs and the likelihood they will engage in CREDs concerning those beliefs. Consequently, existentially secure environments lower the level of exposure to CREDs for subsequent generations. Finally, as outlined above, lowering the level of exposure to CREDs in a population increases the number of individuals who view supernatural agent concepts such as God, ghosts, and demons the same way they view concepts of Hercules, Superman, and Mickey Mouse.

Of course, this argument requires evidence that existentially secure environments do indeed lower commitment to religious ideas and do indeed decrease participation in religious activities. In the next chapter, I will show that evidence from psychology, sociology, and anthropology suggests that existentially secure environments lower levels of commitment to ingroup ideologies, including religious ideologies, lower extrinsic motivations for ritual participation, and lower levels of superstitious behaviour. Through the manipulation of commitment, ritual participation, and superstitious behaviour, such environments directly affect the level of CREDs in a society and, consequently, the levels of theism and non-theism.

## Chapter 5. The Effects of Security/Insecurity on CREDs and a New Account of Secularization

At the end of the previous chapter, I argued that what Norris and Inglehart call “existentially secure” environments work to lower the amount of CREDs towards beliefs in the existence of supernatural agents and, consequently, gradually raise the number of non-theists in those environments. This process occurs primarily because of the common, if not universal, status of religious beliefs and practices as important markers of ingroup identity and commitment and the effects that a variety of threatening stimuli have on ingroup commitment, religious participation, and superstitious behaviour.

Below, I will sketch the important connections between supernatural agent beliefs and practices and identity and review the evidence of the effects of threatening stimuli on commitment and participation, which include the increase of ingroup commitment and authoritarianism, the encouragement of individuals joining or increasing their participation in religious groups, and the increase of performances of what have been labelled as “superstitious” actions. From this evidence, two points emerge. First, nearly all of the documented effects of threatening stimuli, from increased ingroup commitment to participation in religious coalitions to increased performance of “superstitious” actions, either produce or constitute increased CREDs of supernatural agent beliefs. Thus, lowering the levels of these threats in an environment, as the Scandinavian welfare states have done, lowers the amount of CREDs, which results in future generations receiving a lower level of exposure to CREDs, which results in a rise in the number and proportion of non-theists. Second, a variety of types of threats exist, not all of which are directly related to the social-welfare variables discussed by Norris and Inglehart and Gill and

Lundsgaarde. In particular, the concept of normative threat introduced by Karen Stenner (2005) helps better explain the gap between the United States and Europe in that, while the United States does have more insecurity than Europe as discussed by Norris and Inglehart, it also has had and continues to have much higher levels of normative threat.

### The Ties of Supernatural Agent Beliefs and Identity

Amongst more vocal atheists, there is a common argument that religious beliefs should, in a normative sense, be viewed simply as statements about the world and how it works. Richard Dawkins, for example, has repeatedly stressed in print and in his numerous public speaking appearances that “there is no such thing” as a Muslim child or a Christian child, just as there is no such thing as a feminist child or a postmodern child. Children, Dawkins argues, are too young to be able to know “where they stand on such issues” (2006, 3). For Dawkins and many other atheists, religious beliefs are simply hypotheses about the world and must be judged as such.

Most of the atheists I talked to who expressed such opinions, however, view as non-problematic the labelling of a child as a Japanese child or an American child, as these adjectives reveal something about their identity in the world, where they come from, and how they think and behave. Religious beliefs, for these atheists, should not serve as identity markers in the same way as national affiliation. This stance seems to grow at least partly out of frustration among strong atheists that there exists in the West a general taboo on criticizing another individual’s religious beliefs. During a recorded conversation between Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Dan Dennett, for example, all protested what they saw as unfair protection of religious beliefs.

They lamented the fact that it seems perfectly acceptable in modern society to criticize someone's aesthetic judgments and political leanings, but not someone's religious beliefs. For these strong atheists, religious statements about the world are to be judged and even ridiculed like any other statements.

Such a separation between religious belief and identity is a common normative viewpoint amongst strong atheists. Descriptively speaking, however, there are clearly strong connections between supernatural agent beliefs and group identity. Supernatural agent beliefs have not been merely or even primarily statements about how the world works but markers of identity and signs of ingroup commitment in ways not dissimilar to language, clothing style, and body modification. By critiquing someone's religious beliefs, one is not merely arguing against a hypothesis that individual has about the world but arguing against who they are as a member of a religious group.

In the contemporary United States, for example, as evidenced by a large scale survey in 2003, a the majority of citizens have lessened their prejudice towards members of other religions but still see "some kind of religion" as an inherent part of being a decent, "trustworthy" American (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006).<sup>52</sup> Of course, it is not only national but also more local identities that depend on supernatural agent beliefs. This is perhaps best illustrated by the experiences of young John Grimes in James Baldwin's semi-autobiographical novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1952), for whom Christian belief is intimately tied to black identity and the role of his family, most notably his wrathful, oppressive father, in the black community.

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<sup>52</sup> Such a finding is perhaps unsurprising, as scholars have been documenting a common religious core of American identity for over forty years, from Robert Bellah's essay "Civil Religion in America" in 1967 to Caplow, Bahr, and Chadwick's discovery of a "common creed" amongst the various religions in an Indiana town (1983).

“The darkness of his sin was in the hardheartedness with which he resisted God’s power; in the scorn that was often his while he listened to the crying, breaking voices, and watched the black skin glisten while they lifted up their arms and fell on their faces before the Lord. For he had made his decision. He would not be like his father, or his father’s fathers. He would have another life” (19).

For John Grimes, to believe in the Christian God is not merely to postulate something about the way the world works, but to stay in the black community which he has grown to despise as he has envisioned that his intelligence will let him escape his father, escape Harlem, and become a celebrity in the wider, white world:

“His father was God’s minister, the ambassador of the King of Heaven, and John could not bow before the throne of grace without first kneeling to his father. On his refusal to do this had his life depended.....” (21).

A wealth of research in evolutionary anthropology and psychology has sought to explain why these strong connections between religious beliefs and group identity exist (Irons 1996, 2001, 2008; Bulbulia 2004; Sosis and Alcorta 2003; Norenzayan and Shariff 2008; Henrich 2009; Henrich and Atran in press). The most dominant explanations are 1) that displays of commitment to the specific religious ideas and practices of a particular group or society allow individuals in the group to establish whether or not other individuals are trustworthy cooperators who are committed to the group and not to themselves (Irons 2001; Sosis and Bressler 2003) and 2) beliefs in supernatural agents with the interest in and ability to reward and punish moral behaviour discourage anti-social, reputation-damaging behaviour (Johnson 2005; Norenzayan and Shariff 2008). Under both scenarios, in-group cooperation is enhanced and, consequently, so too are individual (Irons 2001, 2008; Johnson 2005) and/or group (Wilson 2002; Henrich 2009)

fitness. According to all of these scholars, these benefits are crucial to explaining the ubiquity and persistence of supernatural agent beliefs and practices.

This work on religious identity and cooperation strongly suggests that supernatural agent beliefs and practices have produced benefits for those individuals and groups who hold them. It is unsurprising, then, to find evidence in the contemporary United States (Edgell, Gerteis, Hartmann 2006) and past contexts, such as the spread of Islam and large-scale trade in Africa (Ensminger 1997) and the successful trade networks of Medieval Jewish merchants (Greif 1993), that people realize the importance of supernatural agent beliefs and practices as signs of trustworthiness and common identity.

There is, then, a good scientific reason for the existence of the connections between supernatural agent beliefs and identity against which many atheists protest. Parents wishing to identify their children as being of a particular ingroup may call their children Christian or Muslim and encourage them to engage in the behaviours and exhibit the beliefs necessary to reap the benefits of group membership. Moreover, having one's religious beliefs attacked as false or as a sign of backwardness is unlikely to merely elicit feelings associated with arguments over factual matters, but rather feelings of deep insult towards one's community and those beliefs and practices that make one a part of that community.

This connection between supernatural agent beliefs and ingroup identity is most certainly not without consequence, as evidence from a variety of research programs show that a variety of perceived threats work to increase an individual's commitment to relevant ingroups (including religions) and their ideologies, to join or increase

participation in religious groups that can provide resources, and to increase their performance of “superstitious” actions, all of which constitute CREDS.

### Threat and Ingroup Commitment

The evidence for the effects of threat on ingroup commitment come from a variety of research programs involving both cross-cultural laboratory studies and large scale surveys, most of which demonstrate that after thinking about threatening situations or stimuli, individuals are more likely to defend their relevant ingroup worldviews from attack by denigrating those who express criticism of these worldviews.

A large body of evidence in social psychology utilizing Terror-Management Theory (TMT), for example, demonstrates that forcing participants to consider their own deaths increases their commitment to relevant ingroups, such as America for US students and particular religions, such as Christianity or Judaism, for self-identifying members of those traditions.<sup>53</sup>

Greenberg and colleagues (1990), for example, asked Christians to evaluate the profiles of numerous individuals, both Christian and Jewish, on a variety of measures such as intelligence and prosociality, as well as the extent to which they would like to work with him/her in a cooperative task. While half of the Christian participants received a control prime prior to the evaluation that asked them to describe their thoughts of the prospect of watching television, the other half received a mortality salience prime, which asked them to “write about (a) what will happen to them as they physically die, and (b)

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<sup>53</sup> Terror-Management Theory, largely the creation of psychologists Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski, was inspired by, and constitutes a systematic statement of, anthropologist Ernest Becker’s claims that human beings produce and cling to cultural worldviews in order to alleviate the existential suffering created by the knowledge of mortality (Becker 1973; Greenberg et al 1997).

the emotions that the thought of their own death arouses in them.” Those participants given the mortality salience prime, who thought about the threatening prospect of death, rated Christian targets higher and Jewish targets lower on all of the desirable attributes than those who received the control prime.

Further, Greenberg and colleagues used the same control and mortality primes on a wider group of American participants in order to investigate whether the threatening prospect of death caused them to alter their judgments of individuals expressing positive or negative views of the United States. Thinking about the prospect of death resulted in participants giving significantly higher ratings to the individual expressing positive sentiments about America and significantly lower rankings to the individual expressing negative sentiments about America.<sup>54</sup>

Evolutionary anthropologists Carlos Navarrete and Dan Fessler have argued against TMT about the psychological causes for these results, stating that rather than being the result of existential anxiety of death, these worldview-defence effects are the result of an evolved cognitive system devoted to committing to coalitions more strongly in the face of threats in order to receive coalitional support in such times (2005). They support their argument with a series of studies in the United States and Costa Rica showing that it is not the thought of death specifically that produces these effects, but thoughts of a variety of threats, including theft and social isolation, that could be ameliorated through coalitional assistance (Navarrete et al. 2004).

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<sup>54</sup> Similar use of mortality salience primes reveals that participants seek to punish those they see as violating the values of society (such as prostitutes) more harshly and reward those they see as upholding the values of society (such as a woman who helped police catch a criminal) more greatly when primed to think about their own deaths (Rosenblatt et al 1989). TMT researchers have also conducted behavioural studies showing that American participants are much more uncomfortable sifting colors through an American flag and much more likely to sit closer to other Americans rather than individuals from other countries when given mortality salience primes (Greenberg et al 1995).

In the United States, for instance, Navarrete and colleagues utilized the same control and mortality salience primes as TMT researchers, but also gave other participants a theft prime, which asked them to write about their physical and emotional response to discovering that their homes had been burglarized, and still others a social isolation prime, which asked them to write about their physical and emotional response to being completely isolated from friends and family. They then had their American participants evaluate two foreign students who had written either pro-American or anti-American essays. Not only those who thought about death, but also those who thought about the threatening scenario of being burglarized, showed significantly more positive responses to the pro-American and significantly more negative responses to the anti-American students (Navarrete et al. 2004).<sup>55</sup>

Moreover, in rural Costa Rica, where participants were asked to respond to the opinions of recent immigrants from other Central American countries regarding Costa Rica as a country after the same set of primes, those participants who thought about being burglarized and being socially isolated showed significantly more positive responses to the immigrants expressing more pro-Costa Rican attitudes and more negative responses to those immigrants expressing more anti-Costa Rican attitudes.<sup>56</sup> Regardless of the mechanism responsible, whether it be an existential fear of death or an evolved coalitional psychological system, the relevant fact for this discussion is that experimental

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<sup>55</sup> These effects were moderated by participants' scores on a Right Wing Authoritarianism scale (Altemeyer 1998), meaning that the primes were effective to the extent that participants had previously expressed "right wing" views. For those individuals scoring very low on the RWA scale, the primes actually caused the participants to exhibit the opposite effect, raising their opinions of the anti-American student. Navarrete and Fessler note that this still constitutes an increase in commitment to ingroup ideology, as, in this case, the participants' ideology is social liberalism.

<sup>56</sup> Interestingly, the Costa Rican participants did not change their views when primed with thoughts of personal death. Navarrete and colleagues suggest that this may well be the result of Costa Rica being more of a "collectivist" culture, as opposed to the more "individualist" culture of the United States, where social isolation was less threatening but personal death was very threatening (2004).

inducement of threatening thoughts serves to increase the defence of one's cultural worldview from attack and more negative views of outgroup individuals.<sup>57</sup>

Political scientist Karen Stenner's work on authoritarianism and threat also supports the conclusion that threatening environments work to increase ingroup commitment, though, notably, Stenner's work shows that it is not only threats to an individual that can cause this effect, but also "normative" threats against the integrity of the group itself. Stenner succeeds in her aim of showing, through both large-scale studies and laboratory studies, that authoritarian or "groupish" behaviours are not solely the product of an underlying disposition but are also responses to threats (2005).<sup>58</sup>

In a national, random digit dialling survey of white Americans (N=844), for example, Stenner finds that by manipulating the types of newspaper stories participants read early in the survey, with some participants reading threatening stories and others reading reassuring stories regarding 1) belief diversity vs. sameness in the country, 2) stability vs. change, 3) the quality of the country's leaders, 4) economic growth vs. decline, and 5) blacks gaining relative to whites and vice-versa, she can significantly influence participants' responses to a variety of "groupish" questions later in the survey. These questions involved the degree with which participants agreed with the rights of white citizens to keep black citizens out of their neighbourhoods, with the right of the government to limit the free speech of those protesting the American way of life, and the

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<sup>57</sup> The work of TMT researchers, as well as those focusing on coalitional psychology, has been called into question recently by a team of researchers at Queen's University Belfast, led by Colin Holbrook, who present evidence that people respond to threats by exhibiting hyper-responses to a much wider range of stimuli, such as pleasant and unpleasant sounds and images (Holbrook et al, submitted). If such results are born out, this calls into question the mechanisms by which ingroup commitment results from threatening stimuli, but does not call into question the fact that it does indeed result.

<sup>58</sup> Groupish behaviours, for Stenner, are those behaviours that seek to uphold the "normative order," or "some system of oneness and sameness that makes 'us' an 'us'" (2005, 17). Normative threats, therefore, are threats to the "oneness and sameness" of the group, which, in modern pluralistic societies, are "common authority" and "shared values" (17).

degree to which they supported local communities requiring prayer in schools. By threatening white Americans' feelings of a secure, white America, Stenner was able to increase their commitment to the "normative order" of this particular ingroup.<sup>59</sup>

Stenner further demonstrated the effects of newspaper stories on the five dimensions mentioned above in a more controlled laboratory study with white college students in New York. She found that by manipulating threat vs. reassurance through the newspaper stories, she could affect participants' scores on a modified Right-Wing Authoritarian Scale, which asked participants to state the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with statements such as, "It is important to protect the rights of deviants and radicals in all ways," "It is wonderful that young people today have greater freedom to protest against things they don't like and to make their own 'rules' to govern their behaviour," and "What our country really needs, instead of more 'civil rights,' is a good stiff dose of law and order."<sup>60</sup>

Stenner's results are important in calling attention to the role of normative, as opposed to mere economic or material, threats in increasing ingroup commitment. Threats to the normative order of a particular religious community or an entire country, such as diversity in beliefs about the supernatural, morality, proper governance, or quality of leadership can work to increase commitment to such groups and, consequently, displays of this commitment through actions. Such displays constitute CREDs for the group's ideologies.

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<sup>59</sup> Just as in the TMT and coalitional psychology research, these effects were moderated by the degree to which participants exhibited an authoritarian or "groupish" disposition, as measured by questions early in the survey about their child-rearing values and questions from a Right-Wing Authoritarian questionnaire. Social liberals were also affected by the primes, but in the opposite direction, being more likely to disagree even more strongly with authoritarian, groupish sentiments.

<sup>60</sup> Earlier measures of authoritarianism once again served as moderating factors in the results.

Aaron Kay and his colleagues offer yet another psychological explanation for worldview defence effects, arguing that instead of resulting from an existential fear of death, an evolved coalitional psychology, or a need for a sense of “us” as “us,” these effects are the result of the human drive for a sense of personal control (Kay et al. 2008). By making people feel as if they are not in control of a given situation, Kay and colleagues argue, you encourage them to more firmly support “external systems of control” such as religions and governments. They support their argument with several studies, including both an analysis of the World Values Survey and several laboratory studies.

In one experimental study with Canadian students, Kay and colleagues manipulate some participants’ feelings of personal control by asking them to recall and describe a particular time in which they felt particularly in control or not in control of a situation. They then show that those participants who recall a time of not feeling in control exhibit significantly higher support for the current social order in Canada, as measured by the extent to which participants agree or disagree with statements such as “societal change is disruptive” and “promoting national stability should be the Canadian government’s main goal.”<sup>61</sup>

Kay’s results are relevant in that more existentially insecure environments are very likely to decrease individuals’ sense of personal control. Events that are difficult to impossible to predict, from natural disasters to disease to large-scale layoffs, all threaten individuals’ feelings of personal control, especially when those individuals’ governments provide minimal services to minimize the threats such events pose to individual lives and

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<sup>61</sup> Again, this result was moderated by the extent to which the participants found the current social order in Canada to be working for their best interest.

well-being. The implication is that, in such environments, individuals are likely to exhibit higher commitment to those ingroup ideologies to which they subscribe. Given the prevalence of religiously oriented ingroups around the world, such environments will encourage greater commitment and, consequently, more CREDs, towards supernatural agent beliefs.

Another theory in social psychology, similar to and perhaps overlapping with the theory that human beings are motivated to maintain a sense of personal control, is that human beings are motivated to avoid uncertainty (Hogg 2000, 2001, 2004; van den Bos 2001). And, in a manner similar to studies of personal control, researchers have documented that manipulating uncertainty produces worldview defence effects (van den Bos et al. 2006).

Kees van den Bos and his colleagues at Utrecht University have conducted both a large (N=1529) internet survey and a laboratory study demonstrating these effects on specifically religious worldviews (2006). In the online survey, van den Bos and colleagues first measured participants' degree of emotional uncertainty using a standardized scale (Greco and Roger 2001). They then manipulated personal uncertainty by having some participants write a paragraph on how they would feel physically and emotionally in a state of uncertainty. All participants then read a short essay by an atheist attacking religious believers as stupid and bigoted and advocating for the burning of the Bible and the Koran. The dependent measure was the extent to which participants agreed or disagreed with the statement, "this article makes me angry." Amongst those individuals with a moderate to high degree of emotional uncertainty, the uncertainty prime provoked significantly more angry responses. In the more tightly controlled

laboratory study, the investigators documented that self-professed religiousness, as measured on a series of questions regarding the importance of religion in the participants' lives and the degree to which they considered themselves religious people, also moderated the effects of uncertainty on the anger shown towards the atheist article. Thus, for more religious and more emotionally uncertain individuals, simulating uncertainty results in a stronger defence of a religious worldview.

There is little doubt that existentially insecure environments produce significant amounts of personal uncertainty about a variety of very important personal matters, from surviving childbirth to how one will respond to sudden unemployment or illness to whether or not a hostile outgroup will attack. The implication of the above studies, which only simulate a limited degree of uncertainty with verbal primes, is that such environments result in religious individuals and emotionally uncertain individuals more strongly committing to and defending their religious beliefs and, consequently, performing more CREDs of those beliefs.

### Threat and Religious Participation

Besides increasing an individual's commitment to groups to which he or she already belongs, evidence from a variety of sources, from quantified historical analysis to ethnography, points to the role of threat in causing individuals to begin participating or to increase participation in religious groups. This is not only or even primarily a result of an increased commitment to the group itself, but rather a reflection of the reality that, in many existentially insecure environments around the world, the only cooperative groups with the resources to assist those in need are those groups holding to supernatural agent

beliefs and observing practices associated with these beliefs. Moreover, the groups that appear to be most attractive to people in such circumstances are those groups encouraging high levels of CREDs.

While many in the West may intuitively conceptualize a “religious person” as being a selfless person, deeply devoted to their beliefs and/or community, scholars and members of religious bodies alike have realized that many individuals do not match the prototype. In fact, through an investigation into why people who rated themselves as more religious actually exhibited higher degrees of ethnic prejudice, psychologists Gordon Allport and Michael Ross (1967) developed a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity, with intrinsically religious people participating out of a deep internal commitment to the religion and extrinsically religious people participating because they derive benefits (whether psychological or material) from doing so.<sup>62</sup> This distinction has produced a wealth of studies within the psychology of religion and, while numerous additions and clarifications have been made to the distinction (Batson et al. 1993), the notion of an extrinsic religious orientation appears to capture a real pattern in religious motivations.

The implication of the literature on extrinsic religiosity is that some individuals participate in religious coalitions, and consequently perform some limited CREDs, not out of a deep commitment to the group or its ideas but out of a desire to reap the benefits

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<sup>62</sup> Psychologists normally establish whether a person exhibits a more intrinsic or extrinsic religious orientation through administering a religious orientation scale (Allport and Ross 1967). The scale asks participants to rate the extent to which they agree or disagree with statements such as: “Quite often I have been keenly aware of the presence of God or the Divine Being,” “Religion is especially important to me because it answers many questions about the meaning of life,” and “I try hard to carry my religion over into all my other dealings in life,” all of which involve intrinsic religiosity, and also statements such as: “The primary purpose of prayer is to gain relief and protection,” “A primary reason for my interest in religion is that my church is a congenial social activity,” and “Occasionally I find it necessary to compromise my religious beliefs in order to protect my social and economic well-being,” all of which involve extrinsic religiosity.

the group can provide.<sup>63</sup> The implication of the evidence below is that many more extrinsically religious individuals increase or begin their participation in resource-providing religious groups in environments of threat and existential insecurity. Perhaps the clearest evidence that many individuals in existentially insecure environments participate in religious groups for extrinsic reasons is that provided by economist Daniel Chen in his work on the effects of the financial crisis of 1997 on religious participation in Indonesia (2008).

In 1997, a financial crisis began in Thailand that strongly affected numerous Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia. In Indonesia, specifically, the local currency, the *rupiah*, plummeted in value and the cost of food more than doubled, creating hardship for large numbers of people. Not all individuals were affected equally by the crisis, however, as those individuals with more farmland could use their own crops for subsistence purposes. Individuals with government and corporate jobs with set wages, however, were hit especially hard, as their wages stayed the same while the value of their wages decreased and the cost of food increased.

With data from the One Hundred Villages Survey (N= 8,140 households) conducted by Indonesia's Census Office before, during, and after the crisis, Chen is able to estimate the effect of relative financial hardship on religious participation. As measures of financial hardship, Chen uses the amount of pre-crisis wetland hectares (as the more hectares an individual has, the more crops they have to consume themselves) and whether or not individuals in the household have government jobs with fixed wages.

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<sup>63</sup> Given that extrinsically religious individuals do not have a deep commitment for the group or its ideologies, the degree to which they would perform CREDs concerning those ideologies is, of course, limited. Such individuals are likely to perform sufficient CREDs to reap the benefits of group membership, but not much more.

As measures of religious participation, Chen examines whether or not, during the crisis, individuals in the household increased, maintained, or decreased their attendance at communal Koran readings, or *Pengajian*, and whether or not households removed their children from cheaper, secular schools in order to send them to more expensive Islamic schools.

Chen finds that the degree to which a household is affected by the crisis is a significant factor in whether or not people increase their religious participation. The average family in the crisis was faced with a \$4.70 decrease per month in non-food expenditure per person (as more of the family budget had to be spent on basic foodstuffs) and this change made the average family 9% more likely to increase their attendance at the local Koran readings and 5% more likely to move their children from cheaper, secular schools, to more expensive, Islamic schools (2008). The strategy of increasing participation seems to be an effective one in shielding households from the worst effects of the crisis, as those households which did increase their religious attendance were 50% less likely to need alms or credit three months after the crisis.

While this evidence strongly suggests that economic threat increases religious participation, it does not speak to the motivations that drove individuals to increase their participation. Using only the evidence above, one could easily interpret these results as yet another instance of existentially insecure environments increasing levels of religious commitment. Yet, Chen also finds a telling piece of evidence that suggests, for many people, it was not religious commitment which drove them to participate more in their Islamic community but rather their wish to reap the material benefits of membership during the crisis. That piece of evidence is that the effect of financial hardship just

discussed virtually disappears in those communities in which relatively low-cost credit is available in the form of banks, microfinance institutions, and loans from the Bank Rakyat Indonesia. In places where households can help ensure their security by obtaining low-collateral loans, more severely affected households were no more likely than less severely affected households to increase their participation in communal Koran study or move their children from secular to Islamic schools. This strongly suggests that the motivation for many affected individuals in increasing their participation and switching their children's place of education was not a deep commitment to Islam or to the specific religious community but rather a desire to gain the social insurance benefits that such participation could provide.

Increasing one's religious participation certainly results in an increase in CREDs, as, in the Indonesian case, individuals used their time to attend religious services and actually paid significantly more money, a potent CRED in a financial crisis, to have their children educated in religious schools. Yet, participating in some religious groups demands more CREDs than participating in others and some intriguing evidence, reviewed below, points to the fact that more demanding and authoritarian religious organizations benefit significantly more in terms of membership gains than lax and liberal religious organizations in threatening, insecure environments. Consequently, insecure environments can encourage even more CREDs among a population than if individuals converted to all types of religious groups equally in the face of insecurity.

Both the work of Stephen Sales (1972) and the later work of Stewart McCann (1999) point to role of particularly threatening times in twentieth century American history in increasing conversion rates to strict, authoritarian churches. Sales, like many

social psychologists in post-war America, was interested in authoritarianism. He lamented the fact, however, that all of the existing studies of authoritarianism and threat were laboratory based. He sought a more naturalistic measure and chose to examine the conversion rates of authoritarian and non-authoritarian Christian denominations in the United States to see if threatening times and non-threatening times had any effect on their conversion rates.

Sales compared the conversion rates, as measured by the number of converts per 1,000,000 non-members in the US population in a given year, of four authoritarian denominations (The Southern Baptist Convention, The 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventist Church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and the Roman Catholic Church) as well as four non-authoritarian denominations (The Presbyterian Church of the US, The Congregational Christian Church, The Northern Baptist Convention, and the Protestant Episcopal Church). Focusing on economic threats, Sales found that, in the period from 1920-1939, a period containing no American wars but a dramatic change in economic prosperity, there existed moderate to strong negative correlations between per capita disposable income and the conversion rates for the authoritarian churches and moderate to strong positive correlations with the conversion rates for the non-authoritarian churches. The evidence suggests that authoritarian churches saw a significant increase in membership as the Great Depression hit while non-authoritarian churches saw their increases in the relatively affluent 1920's.

Seeking to further test Sales claims, Stewart McCann has conducted two quantitative historical studies of his own. In the first, he extends the timeframe from 1920-1939 to 1928-1986 while halving the number of authoritarian and non-authoritarian

denominations. He also elicits assistance from fourteen historians, who rate each year from 1928-1986 for economic, social, and political threats to the “socio-political order” of the United States. Using this measure of threat, as well as conversion rates for the four denominations, McCann finds significant positive correlations between threat and conversion to authoritarian churches, just as Sales did. Further, McCann finds that by adding social and political threats to his regression models he can account for more of the variance than with economic threats alone, suggesting that, in a manner similar to Stenner’s work on threat and authoritarianism, it is not only economic insecurity that can affect ingroup commitment and religious participation.

In his second study, McCann extends his analysis to twenty-five different denominations, which, conveniently, had been rated by sociologist Dean Kelly on a “strictness gradient” utilizing the criteria of discipline, conformity, absolutism, commitment, fanaticism, and missionary zeal (Kelly 1972). McCann proceeds to compare three ten-year periods, (1955-1964) classified as low threat, (1965-1974) classified as high threat, and (1975-1984), classified as low threat, on their effects on conversion rates for more strict and less strict denominations. McCann finds that the strict denominations exhibit their highest membership gains or lowest membership losses during the period of high threat (1965-1974) while the less strict denominations exhibit their highest membership gains or lowest membership losses in the periods of low threat. This analysis draws even further attention to the role of perceived social and political threats, over and against mere economic threats, on religious participation and CREDs, as economic threat did not distinguish these three periods in American history.

Besides the quantitative studies above, numerous ethnographers and historians also testify in their own work to the power of threatening environments to cause great numbers of people to participate in resource-providing religious communities.

Numerous scholars, for instance, have documented the importance of religious groups in the material, social, and spiritual well-being of African Americans. From clandestine meetings among slaves in “hush harbours” in the ante-bellum American South (Moore 1991) to the numerous congregations making up the contemporary Black Church (McRae et al. 1998; Patillo-McCoy 1998), religious coalitions have served to provide material and psychological resources for African Americans in the midst of a challenging and often brutally hostile environment. Psychologist Kenneth Pargament, citing this and other evidence of the relative importance of religiosity in the lives of those in less powerful positions in society, suggests that people “turn to religion” through prayer and social communion in threatening situations to the extent that religious communities constitute their only means of attaining such resources (1997).

Further, historian and religious studies scholar Phillip Jenkins has assembled evidence documenting the rapid spread of more conservative strains of Christianity throughout what he and others label the “Global South” of Latin America, Africa, and Asia (2002). Jenkins discusses how, as traditional forms of community have broken down and colonial administrations have given way to often unstable national governments over the course of the twentieth century, conservative Christianity and Islam have flourished as ideological bases for cohesive, cooperative social networks. Jenkins’ account of the ferocious growth of these religious communities in highly insecure environments accords with the findings of both sociologist Bryan Roberts in Latin

America (1968) and social anthropologist Richard Vokes in the Great Lakes Region of Central Africa (2008).

Bryan Roberts, from his ethnography and surveys in two low-income neighbourhoods in Guatemala City in the 1960's, argues for the crucial role of Protestant sects in providing much needed social networks and support to recent urban migrants (1968). Roberts notes that Catholic Church, the dominant faith throughout Latin America, lacked the priests and resources to adequately assist recently-arrived migrants with social insurance and employment, as Catholicism in Guatemala City was more of a "loose identity" than a cohesive community of mutual obligation. The only available option for many of these individuals, Roberts notes, was a Protestant sect, normally a small congregation that gave the individual both the direct material benefits of being in a social network and also the Protestant message of sobriety and personal responsibility that, if heeded, would allow them to succeed, to some extent, in their new environment.

The growth of relatively small religious sects in challenging, insecure environments is certainly not limited to Latin America, as Richard Vokes work on the Mission for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God (MRTC) movement in Uganda clearly shows (2008). Vokes, in his investigation of the context of the Kanungu fire of 2000, which killed more than five-hundred people at the MRTC headquarters, argues for the causal connection between the existentially insecure environment in Uganda, and the growth of the MRTC.

Vokes argues that to understand the reason for the Kanungu fire, one must reach back before Catholic missionization to a number of secretive networks devoted to the fertility goddess Nyabingi. In these networks, individuals suffering from infertility and

other problems would be forced to borrow substantial resources from friends and neighbours in order to pay a Nyabingi medium to solicit the goddess for help. Such networks created bonds of obligation between borrowers and lenders, but also served as social insurance networks, as the Nyabingi mediums, in the event of a famine or natural disaster, would redistribute the wealth generated through such payments to those most in need. Participating in a Nyabingi network, then, was an important way of obtaining social insurance.

After Catholic missionization in the 1920's, Vokes relates, the name Nyabingi was rarely spoken. Yet, the networks of exchange and insurance remained, with the Virgin Mary serving as the fertility goddess and the local Catholic priests and missionaries serving as the mediums. This situation was a boon to security in the area, as the missionaries had access to resources beyond those given by propitiators of the Virgin through their connections with the larger Catholic Church and, consequently, could disburse significant resources in times of hardship and social upheaval, such as the period of state collapse between the 1960's and 1980's.

Yet, in the 1980's and 1990's, foreign priests and resources became scarce and priests from local communities in Uganda, with much fewer resources, took their place. Subsequently, large numbers of people began to once again participate in secretive social networks apart from the Catholic Church, including the MRTC, whose medium, Credonia Mwerinde, professed to have access to the Virgin Mary and her abilities to alleviate infertility and social stress and whose leadership pledged to redistribute the exorbitant joining fees to those most in need in a time of crisis. The explosive re-growth of such secretive networks, Vokes argues, is clearly attributable to the devastating AIDS

epidemic in Africa in the 1990's, which continues to pose a massive threat to survival. Given the general lack of social services in Uganda and the withdrawal of substantial foreign resources from the local Catholic churches, many individuals had little choice but to turn to such groups for purposes of social insurance.

All of the above cases, from participation in communal Koran readings in Indonesia, to increased participation in more stricter and more cohesive Christian denominations in the United States, to the attraction of cohesive Christian communities in Guatemala and Uganda, support the conclusion that existentially insecure environments, besides causing increased commitment to ingroups and their ideologies, also encourage more extrinsically-oriented participation in religious coalitions for the purposes of attaining material and social support.

Participating in a groups' activities, including rituals and resource distribution, constitutes a CRED towards the beliefs of the group.<sup>64</sup> Consequently, the implication of the above evidence is that threatening, existentially uncertain environments can also work to maintain high levels of theism in a society by encouraging vulnerable individuals to participate in resource-providing religious groups.

### Threat and Performance of "Superstitious Actions"

The Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers, a non-profit group in the United States that helps non-theistic military personnel network with each other and local

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<sup>64</sup> Performing CREDs towards a particular belief, it should be noted, does not conclusively prove, academically or otherwise, that an individual truly holds that belief. Henrich's account of the role of CREDs is not that they are perfect indicators of the performer's psychology but that human beings have a tendency to believe the statements of individuals to the extent that they perform CREDs towards those statements. Participating in a religious group constitutes a CRED towards the ideology of that group, though further displays such as emotional statements of commitment during participation would certainly serve as a more powerful CRED.

organizations and also provides information about secular counselling and other services, frequently refers to its membership as “atheists in foxholes.” This self-reference is used specifically to counteract the widely held aphorism “there are no atheists in foxholes.”

The Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers is surely correct to point out that the aphorism is not always accurate. There are indeed a significant number of non-theists and strong atheists in the American military, and likely many more in the militaries of European nations. At the American Atheist Conference in Minneapolis in 2008, as a case in point, those military personnel in attendance were asked to stand and were given a round of applause by the well over 500 attendees. Yet, while the strong claim that human beings necessarily believe in some supernatural agency when confronted with life-threatening circumstances is clearly false, the claim that threatening circumstances increase the likelihood that an individual will engage in religious or superstitious actions such as prayer, is well supported by the personal experiences of non-theists and theists alike, large scale surveys, and both laboratory and naturalistic studies.<sup>65</sup>

In several of my interviews with theists and non-theists alike, individuals recalled the role of upsetting and threatening situations in encouraging prayer and other religious actions by their parents. A 35 year old self-identified agnostic from New York, for example, stated that while he and his mother attended a non-denominational Christian church with some frequency during his adolescence, they would always attend when his mother was experiencing a specific stressor such as moving house or having a close

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<sup>65</sup> Such actions constitute CREDs towards supernatural agent beliefs in that they would not normally be performed if the performer did not hold the underlying belief. Rather than spend all of their time and energy on directly dealing with the threatening situation, performers of religious actions such as prayer are demonstrating their belief by taking time and energy to pray to some supernatural agency. For an observer, such actions suggest that the performers of such actions believe there to be some value in those actions and, by implication, there to be some supernatural agency whose response makes those displays worth while.

relative in the hospital. On these occasions, he noted, she would become much more emotional during the praise-and-worship periods of the service, nearly always raising her hands and weeping.

Anne, a 22 year old self-identified Christian from Missouri discussed her mother's similar responses to stressors, though she noted that such displays were not limited to church services. She reported that her mother frequently shared threatening situations concerning her possible unemployment or health problems while they were in the family car and that, upon reaching a destination, her mother, usually in tears, would ask her daughter to take her hand and pray with her about the situation. When I asked Anne how those prayer sessions made her feel about her mother, she replied that, besides feeling empathy and love for her, she could not help but be impressed by her faith in God.

In addition to these personal accounts of the role of threatening stimuli in encouraging prayer, large scale surveys also support the connection. Within days of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in the United States in 2001, Mark Shuster and colleagues conducted a nation-wide telephone survey using random digit-dialling and obtained full responses from well over 500 individuals regarding their reactions to the stress created by the attacks. After asking participants several modified questions from a post-traumatic stress disorder checklist (Asmundsen et al. 2000) in order to establish the degree of stress engendered by the attacks, Shuster and his colleagues asked participants the extent to which they had been engaging in a variety of coping behaviours such as "talking with someone about your thoughts and feelings," "participating in a public or group activity in recognition of what happened," and "turning to prayer, religion, or spiritual feelings." In

total, 92% of respondents replied that they had turned to prayer, religion, or spiritual feelings to at least some extent, with 75% replying that they had turned to it to a medium or high extent. Moreover, those individuals that exhibited more severe stress reactions, as measured by the earlier questions from the post-traumatic stress disorder checklist, were significantly more likely to turn to prayer and religion to at least a medium extent (84% vs. 69%,  $p < .001$ ). The implication of these data is that the threatening events of September 11, 2001 resulted in a large proportion of the US population “turning to prayer and religion.” Any individuals in homes and workplaces with those affected by events of September 11<sup>th</sup> would, then, have their exposure to CREDs of supernatural agent beliefs increased.

Better controlled laboratory studies also support the connection between threatening stimuli and the increased likelihood of praying among American participants, as can be seen in the review of such literature in psychologist of religion Kenneth Pargament’s *The Psychology of Religion and Coping* (1997). In 1947, for example, psychologist A.T. Welford presented different groups of Protestant university students with vignettes concerning a variety of pleasant and unpleasant situations, including getting a serious illness, losing a job, taking a leisurely walk in the woods. Participants ranked these vignettes according to the degree to which they “stirred their emotions,” lie beyond their ability with which to cope, and made them want to pray. Those scenarios rated as very arousing and/or frustrating were clearly associated with an increased likelihood that the participant would pray as a response to scenario. One participant during the post-experiment debriefing stated “things that are ordinary require less praying than situations when emergencies arise,” while another confessed that he “would feel

most like praying at the hour of death because I believe that only prayer can carry you through such a time” (Pargament 1997, 140).

Decades later, psychologists Jeffrey Bjork and Lawrence Cohen specifically identified threatening scenarios as more likely to cause individuals to engage in prayer than merely arousing or even personally challenging circumstances (1993). Participants were significantly more likely to say that they would pray in response to situations of threat, such as getting caught in a storm at sea without a life-jacket, and loss, such as getting laid off from a job, than when they were presented with a personally challenging but not necessarily threatening scenario, such as having an opportunity for a scholarship.

Prayer is not the only religious action one may take in response to a threatening scenario. Anthropologist Richard Sosis, in an attempt to further Malinowski’s work on the use of fishing magic in the Trobriand Islands (1948) and other work on superstition in baseball (Gmelch 1973; Burger and Lynn 2005) having to do with what Burger and Lynn refer to as the “uncertainty hypothesis” (superstitious behaviours increase when people believe outcomes are determined by uncontrollable forces), examined whether or not the threatening and uncertain situation created by the Second Palestinian Intifada caused Israeli women to increase their frequency of psalm recitation (Sosis 2007).<sup>66</sup> Sosis coordinated interviews with 367 women in the town of Tzfat concerning their behavioural responses to the Second Intifada.

Sosis found two strands of evidence supporting the claim that the threatening situation created by the Intifada caused an increase in the performance of psalm

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<sup>66</sup> Many Israeli women regularly recite Psalms as part of their religious practices, though it is not mandated by Jewish law. According to Sosis’ interview data, Israeli women view psalm recitation as one of the top actions to take in order to improve *matzav* or “situation” and, specifically, to protect oneself from a terrorist attack (Sosis 2008). The other actions deemed most helpful are *tzitzit*, a fringed garment worn exclusively by men, and carrying the picture of a holy person.

recitation. Among the self-described religious interviewees, 83% reported an increase in their psalm recitation since the beginning of the Intifada, while, notably, 35.7% of self-described secular interviewees also reported an increase. Moreover, among the secular interviewees, whether or not an individual increased their psalm recitation depended significantly on whether that individual knew someone killed in the Intifada, experienced a drop in income, or believed that Tzfat was soon to be attacked (Sosis 2008). From this evidence, Sosis concludes that conditions of “life-threatening stress” may elicit evolved motivations to turn toward culturally-learned rituals in order to gain some sense of control in uncertain situations.<sup>67</sup>

If these culturally-learned rituals are observed by others, then they constitute CREDs for the performers’ beliefs regarding the existence and efficacy of supernatural agency. In the case of psalm recitation, for example, Sosis notes that psalm recitation is in most cases a private ritual, minimizing its ability to serve as a CRED. Yet, during the Intifada, large groups of women in Tzfat organized in order to ensure that the Book of Psalms would be recited daily in its entirety. Some of the assigned psalm recitations were performed by individuals while some were performed in communal gatherings, which would constitute CREDs for the women’s beliefs in God and the power of the psalms.

The evidence above presents a strong case for the role of threatening, existentially insecure environments in increasing commitment to ingroups and their ideologies (including supernatural agent beliefs), participation in religious coalitions, and the

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<sup>67</sup> With this statement, Sosis is in agreement with the work of Hogg and van den Bos in that Sosis sees a motivation to avoid uncertainty, rather than existential anxiety about death or an evolved coalitional psychology, as the crucial mechanism driving such behaviour. Regardless of the postulated mechanism, however, the empirical fact of increased commitment to group ideologies and performance of group-sanctioned ritual procedures increases in the face of the threatening stimuli.

performance of prayer and other “superstitious” actions. This evidence has come from ethnographies such as those of Bryan Roberts in Guatemala and Richard Vokes in Uganda, as well as large-scale surveys of U.S. citizens in the wake of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and Israeli women in response to the constant stress of the Second Palestinian Intifada, and laboratory studies of a host of researchers concerned with terror-management, coalitional psychology, personal control, and uncertainty.

### Implications for CREDs and Theism/Non-theism

Crucially for a discussion of non-theism and cross-national differences in religious behaviour and belief, all of the effects of threat mentioned above, increased commitment to ingroup ideologies, increased participation in religious coalitions, and increased performance of prayer and other superstitious actions, constitute an increase in CREDs of supernatural agent beliefs. The more committed one is to an ideology, including religious ideologies involving supernatural agents, the more likely one is to reveal that commitment through one’s actions and expressions, from being more likely to defend one’s religious beliefs from verbal attack to exhibiting more emotion during religious services. The more one participates in a religious coalition, the more one is obliged to participate in cooperative group activities, initiations, and payments. The more one prays or recites religious verbal formulas, the more one is demonstrating to any observers the level of commitment one has to the beliefs underlying them.

But what happens when environments become less threatening and more existentially secure? My argument is not that of Norris and Inglehart, who argue that individuals hold religious beliefs such as supernatural agent beliefs mostly because they

find them comforting in the midst of their insecure environments. I suggested in a previous chapter that this view of religion and psychology is mistaken in that numerous sets of supernatural beliefs and worldviews are very non-comforting and that there is little to no evidence for the claim that human beings believe things to be the case to the extent that they find the prospect of their being true comforting, enlightening, or uplifting. Rather than immediately connect religious belief with insecure environments via a psychological mechanism of wishful thinking, I am suggesting that existentially secure environments lower commitment to ingroup ideologies such as religious beliefs, lower the amount of people joining and participating in religious coalitions for extrinsic reasons, and lower the number of performances of prayer and other “superstitious” actions. In other words, existentially secure, non-threatening environments work to lower the amount of CREDs of supernatural agent beliefs. Consequently, over the span of one to two generations, existentially secure environments see a dramatic increase in its proportion of non-theists.

### The United States, Denmark, and Normative Threat

The above account concerning threats, their effects on CREDs, and the role of CREDs in determining whether or not an individual comes to believe in the existence of supernatural agents can better account for the data produced by both large scale social surveys, such as Norris and Inglehart’s and Gill and Lundsgaarde’s, as well as more detailed international fieldwork, such as Zuckerman’s and my own.

First, the above account does not suffer from the anthropological and psychological difficulties present in the existing explanations for the sociological data,

such as Norris and Inglehart's explanation that people exhibit more religious belief and practice in insecure, threatening environments because it is comforting and reassuring. Again, a survey of the anthropology of religion will reveal a host of religious traditions and cultures with frightening, unpredictable, vengeful supernatural agents and forces thriving in insecure, threatening environments. Similarly, a survey of cognitive psychology will reveal little to no evidence for the assumption underlying the comfort hypothesis that human beings find comforting representations significantly more believable than non-comforting representations. Second, as I will argue below, the addition of the category of normative threat, as outlined by Stenner, to the catalogue of threatening stimuli encouraging higher levels of ingroup commitment can help better explain the long-standing and puzzling difference between the United States and Scandinavian welfare states, such as Denmark, in levels of religious belief and practice.

Norris and Inglehart make a convincing case that levels of existential security at a national level help to determine the degree of religious belief and practice in a country, thus helping explain why very insecure parts of the world, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, exhibit such high levels of religious belief and practice compared to Europe. Yet, Norris and Inglehart also argue, by referencing the high degree of economic inequality and relative lack of welfare spending in the United States, that such economic factors can also explain the difference in religious intensity between European welfare states and the United States. This case is not as convincing, as while the US does indeed exhibit a higher GINI coefficient than most European countries and does indeed spend a lower portion of its GDP on social welfare, the United States is still a very wealthy country with much higher levels of existential security than many nations in Sub-Saharan Africa,

South America, and Southeast Asia. It is much closer to the European welfare states in its national level of existential security than it is to Zimbabwe. Yet, according to historians of religion such as Catherine Albanese (1998) as well as large scale surveys such as the World Values Surveys (Norris and Inglehart 2004), its level of religious belief and practice more closely match those of nations showing significant existential insecurity in Africa and the Middle East.

Clearly, other factors besides existential security, at least as measured by the economic factors employed by Norris and Inglehart and Gill and Lundsgaarde, are involved in determining levels of religious belief and practice. I will argue below that by considering normative threats, which necessarily leads us to the consideration of the particular histories, socio-cultural structures and identities present in the countries under examination, we can help solve this puzzle.

That there are differences between the Scandinavian welfare states, including Denmark, and the United States in terms of the existential security of their respective citizens seems clear. As measured by the Central Intelligence Agency's GINI index of economic inequality, for instance, Denmark and Sweden have the most economically equal citizens in the world. The United States, meanwhile, lies far down the list at 94, between the Ivory Coast and Uruguay (CIA World Factbook), implying that a large number of American citizens do not access the great wealth present in the United States.

The differences exist far beyond the statistics, however, as can be seen in the survey responses and conversations of hundreds of individuals from both the United States and Europe. I asked many of my survey participants, for example, how vulnerable they would feel, both for themselves and for their children, if they lost their job and other

sources of income as well as why they would feel that way. A non-theist from Mississippi, stressed that she would be very vulnerable, as she would have to rely on her family for support. Given the fact that they have not “gotten along” for some time, she said that she would be quite anxious about the situation. Another young woman from the United States responded: “I have NO ONE. My parents were highly abusive. I have no siblings. No spouse. I have no one. If I lost my job, I’d probably end up in a shelter.” Another American man in his 30’s expressed both his vulnerability and his displeasure with the American system: “The United States has taken a more or less ‘fuck you and die’ approach to providing for its citizens. How is it we don’t look at healthcare as a right? Other industrialized nations do... I am like many millions of Americans -deep in debt & only one paycheck away from total disaster. God bless the USA!” Though many American respondents were comfortable relying on their families or their own ingenuity to deal with such a crisis, such expressions of vulnerability and indignation were by no means uncommon.

The contrast between American responses to this question and Danish and Swedish responses was stark. In many conversations and interviews, any real vulnerability was quickly dismissed, as if it was a ridiculous possibility. “We don’t let things like that happen here,” one Danish man in Copenhagen said after listening to my description of the hardships faced by many Americans in places such as East St. Louis, Illinois, near which I lived while growing up and while conducting fieldwork. In response to the survey questions regarding vulnerability, the answers were often short and too the point. “Government” replied one Swedish woman. “We have a strong social

welfare system here. I would not be worried” responded a young man from Helsingør, Denmark.

A similar discrepancy made itself apparent regarding health care in the US and Denmark, as I heard from several American families during my fieldwork about their troubles with insurance premium payments, which had gone up substantially as their employers or former employers cut benefits to workers in order to trim costs. While several of these families were well-off enough to only have to scale back vacations and future luxury purchases because of this development, a few others were facing a much tougher choice between groceries and health insurance. After hearing these stories in the US, I travelled to the United Kingdom and Denmark, where I heard personal stories about the security provided by national health care and incredulous questions from UK residents and Danes who had seen Michael Moore’s film *Sicko* (2007), which contrasts the healthcare policies of the United States with those of other countries including the UK, France, and Cuba.

Yet, despite these very real differences in existential security, it is at least an exaggeration to suggest that the United States more closely resembles Zimbabwe and Namibia than it does Denmark and Sweden on the economic measures of existential security employed by Norris and Inglehart. The United States score on the UN Human Development Index, for example, which includes average life expectancy, literacy rate, educational attainment, and per capita GDP, ranks among the highest in the world (Norris and Inglehart 2004). Further, despite large numbers of financially insecure individuals and families in the United States, deaths from starvation or thirst are very rare in comparison to nations such as Somalia and Rwanda, where refugees often face both.

Given that the US is closer in matters of existential security to Scandinavian welfare states such as Denmark and Sweden than it is to nations such as Afghanistan and Somalia, it still remains puzzling as to why the United States remains closer to Zimbabwe and Angola than to Denmark and Sweden in levels of religious belief and practice.

This puzzle can be partially solved, I argue, if we expand “existential security” to designate threats beyond those of immediate physical survival to include those threats labelled “normative” by Stenner.<sup>68</sup> Again, for Stenner, “normative threats” are perceived threats to the “oneness or sameness” of a particular identity group, which, in modern pluralistic societies, she argues, are constituted mostly by views of “common authority” and “shared values.” If the normative order of a group is threatened through failed leadership, diversity of opinions on proper behaviour, or the growing power of perceived outgroups, Stenner’s work shows, we see “groupish behaviours,” those behaviours seeking to uphold the “normative order,” which would also constitute CREDs towards the specific ideologies of that normative order, increase (Stenner 2005).<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> It is true that Norris and Inglehart, in their defining of existential insecurity, refer to societal as well as physical and personal risks. Yet, their measures of existential insecurity involve development, per capita GDP, economic inequality, education, healthcare, and life expectancy. Perceived threats to a “way of life” or a particular identity, whether through social change or large scale immigration, are not included. Thus, normative threats are not included in the measures employed by Norris and Inglehart (2004, 62-63).

<sup>69</sup> While Stenner does not devote extensive space to outlining the concepts of “normative order” and, therefore, “normative threat” in great detail, the concepts are by no means new in the social sciences. Durkheim’s account of religion, for instance, argues that religious beliefs are the result of individuals attempting to grasp the normative order, that is, the set of behavioural and cognitive norms of a social group, in which they find themselves placed (1912). More recently, Charles Taylor (2004, 2007) has used the term “social imaginary” to label the mental representations individuals hold of the society in which they live, not just its name but the type of person who is a proper member, the norms which should govern individual behaviour, and what the society is for, whether it be the flourishing of a particular descent group, the glorifying of a particular supernatural agent, or advancing human happiness and freedom.

The origins and importance of such normative orders have been outlined by evolutionary anthropologists Peter Richerson and Robert Boyd (2005). Richerson and Boyd argue that the cumulative and rapid cultural adaptations human beings typically develop to different environments lead to the existence of symbolically marked groups, that is, groups with particular signs of ingroup membership such as a particular ethnic appearance, styles of dress and speech, and ingroup ideologies and behavioural norms, in other words, “normative orders” (2005). These signs allow individuals to identify in-group members for the purposes of both selective imitation (as local populations are good sources of information

By examining the histories of the United States and Denmark in terms of how their respective national identities and “normative orders” were constructed, the role of religious beliefs and practices in those identities, and the levels of perceived threat to those identities engendered by particular events in the nations’ respective histories, we come to see that American identity has consistently included religious beliefs and that the United States has consistently experienced significant normative threats and, conversely, we come to see that Danish identity no longer includes religious beliefs and that Denmark has, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, experienced low levels of normative threat. Given the role that normative threats play in increasing ingroup commitment and, in the event that one’s ingroup exhibits a normative order involving the existence of supernatural agency, CREDS of supernatural agent beliefs, such a difference in levels of normative threat can better explain why the United States exhibits such high levels of religiosity while Denmark and Sweden do not.

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about how to exploit a local environment) and selective interaction (as greater benefits can be gained by interacting with others who share the same moral judgments, exchange practices, and notions of proper interpersonal interaction). Richerson and Boyd argue that these markers arose not in order to allow ingroup altruists to recognize other altruists, as this idea faces to problem that many such markers are easy to fake. Rather, they argue that such markers show that an individual is a member of a group ‘that shares cooperative norms that are enforced by moralistic punishment;’ “wearing the badge of a community whose altruism is protected by moral rules and moralistic punishment supplements cheap talk with a big stick” (2005, 213).

Given the account of Richerson and Boyd, we can more clearly see why the stimuli Stenner labels as “normative threats,” such as “common authority” and “shared values” are, in fact, so threatening. If interpersonal interaction and trust is to some extent dependent upon the existence of reliable signs that others are members of the same ingroup, behaving according to the same norms, and subject to the same moralistic punishments for transgressions, then indicators that others in the group, especially those in positions of authority, may hold different norms or have some allegiance to a perceived outgroup are perceived as threatening, as they call into question the basis of the mutual trust necessary for interpersonal exchange and collective action.

## A) The United States

The settlement of the Americas, and the land that would later become the United States, was by no means the work of immigrants from a single nation or religious group. In 1744, for instance, decades before the founding of the American nation, Swedish botanist Peter Kalm, on a naturalist expedition to North America, reported his encounters with “a very mixed company of different nations and religions” in his travels through Pennsylvania. Besides Scots, English, Dutch, Germans, and Irish, he reported, “there were Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Quakers, Methodists, Seventh Day men, Moravians, Anabaptists, and one Jew” (quoted in Garraty 1995, 61).

The process by which individuals identified themselves as Americans, rather than members of particular religious or ethnic groups, was and still remains complicated and contested. Yet, most historians identify a “mainstream” American identity, a “normative order” that develops over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and persists in diminished form even into the 21<sup>st</sup> that is white, Christian (more specifically Protestant), and capitalist (Albanese 1998; Garraty 1995; Bellah et al. 1985; Edgell et al. 2006). Once this American identity is in place, threats to it can come from new immigrants who were not raised as “Americans,” from non-whites (including both African Americans and Native Americans), from non-Christians and even non-Protestants, from those with a very different view of what America should be, such as communists. All such threats to the “normative order” of the nation, based on Stenner’s work and the observations of many historians, work to increase ingroup commitment to “America” among those holding to this identity.

Crucially for my purposes in this thesis, belief in a supernatural agent, “God” has been and remains an important part of American identity in the minds of most Americans. The implication is that threats to the normative order of the United States increase commitment to its ingroup ideology, including a belief in the existence of God.

Historian of American religion, Catherine Albanese (1998), as well as sociologist of religion Robert Bellah (1985), outline how the pluralism of early America produced a “common core” of American identity with a strong religious component. As Bellah notes, the identities of “Christian” and “citizen” were very closely linked in colonial New England, and the local Protestant minister was elected by everyone in the town, not just those attending his particular church (1985). The Protestant tradition so prevalent in New England became tied to a larger national identity not only through its superior number of adherents, but also because of the fact that the citizens of this region worked to create the media, especially school textbooks, that gave other American citizens their view of the young nation (Albanese 1998). The effectiveness of this coupling of Protestant ideas and practices with American identity can be seen by the number of other religious groups within the United States changing to more closely resemble this Protestant core.<sup>70</sup>

Further, as Albanese and others relate, theological ideas and religious rules specific to individual communities, as well as any potential divisive theological pronouncements, were continually deemphasized as the country expanded and the frontier was settled and, gradually, churchified (Finke and Stark 2005). Such simplification

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<sup>70</sup> Reform Jews, for instance, moved their Sabbath to Sunday and changed their services to more closely imitate Protestant services in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Similarly, Japanese Buddhists within the United States began to speak of “churches” and “bishops” and also instituted Sunday services. Moreover, African Americans who reached the middle class often moved to integrated churches or African American churches that more closely resembled the churches of white Protestants in style (Albanese 397).

to a common set of representations was necessary, she argues, in order to include the most people in growing frontier communities who needed to be united but who came from, or were the children of individuals who came from, a variety of countries and religious denominations.

This connection between Christianity, though more recently “religion” and “God,” and American identity has continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as evidenced in numerous surveys, interview projects, and national events. When Robert Bellah and his colleagues set out to examine the roles of individualism and commitment in American life in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, for instance, they did not ask many questions directly about religion. Yet, they found that the vast majority of those with whom they spoke would insert religion into their answers about proper citizenship and how to live a moral life (1985). Further, when outspoken atheist Madalyn Murray O’Hair won her Supreme Court case in 1963, which ended the daily practice of prayer in American schools, she was harassed by many in her neighbourhood in Baltimore, who painted “Communist” in large red letters across the alley by her house, vandalized her home and car. Indeed, she became the “most hated woman in America” (Le Beau 2003). It is the label “communist” that is key in identifying this situation as an example of religious belief serving as a marker of American identity, as during the Cold War, being labelled as a communist was to be labelled a traitor to America. In the eyes of many, being an atheist in America in the 1960’s was tantamount to treason.

In a more recent national survey by a team of sociologists from the University of Minnesota, Americans still show a strong identification with religious belief, though now the particular type of religion, whether Catholic Christianity, or even non-Christian

religions such as Judaism and Islam, is less important (Edgell et al. 2006). Atheists, for example, were selected as the “least likely to share my vision of American society” more often than any other minority, including Muslims, which in a post 9-11 America, is quite significant. Similarly, a 2007 Gallup poll revealed that most Americans ranked atheists last out of ten minority categories, including homosexuals, blacks, and Mormons, when asked the question “If your party nominated a generally well-qualified person for president who happened to be (X), would you vote for that person” (Cited in Edgell et al. 2006).

Given the importance of belief in the Judaeo-Christian God in the normative order of the United States, threats to that normative order (which for many also includes white ethnicity and capitalism) should buoy commitment to that belief and, consequently, CREDs towards that belief. A quick survey of the history of the United States will reveal that the country, largely because of its status as an immigrant, pluralistic nation and its drive to be a major player in world affairs, has experienced an abundance of threats to its normative order, from ethnic diversity to the division between northern and southern states over slavery, to the growing numbers, freedoms, and prominence of African Americans, to domestic and foreign communists who were thought by many to be attempting to bring an end to the American way of life.

While the “mainstream” American identity was created by the discourse and activity of white Protestants who took on the label “American,” they were never alone in the United States. Even prior to the American Revolution, national pluralism and prejudice was widespread. In New York City in the 1740’s, for example, an English resident complained that “Our chiefest unhappiness here is too great a mixture of nations,

and English the least part” (quoted in Garraty 1995, 61). Similarly, Benjamin Franklin wrote that he found the Germans of Pennsylvania “clannish to a fault.”

After the American Revolution and the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, such ethnic differences became even more pronounced, as thousands of immigrants from many different countries in Europe and Asia came to the United States and these different groups struggled for jobs and influence in the growing cities. This is perhaps best illustrated by the Draft Riots of 1863, when, after the Union passed the Conscription Act that required citizens to join the fight against the South unless they paid \$300, working class whites, mostly Irish Catholics, who believed that freed blacks would compete with them for jobs, rioted for days and attacked both blacks and middle-class Protestants around the city. Further, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, politicians were forced to learn that “all politics is local” in that national candidates, when travelling the country for support, would have to negotiate specific local divisions of ethnicity and religion if they were to have it (Garraty 1995).

Ethnic diversity continues to cause problems for national unity in the United States, as evidenced by the discourse surrounding immigration from Mexico. Many Americans, both white and black, are concerned about the increase not only of Mexican migrant workers taking jobs in the United States, but also the normative threat posed by their language and customs. I overheard several individuals from as far apart as Houston and Chicago angry at the fact that many road and business signs in Texas and California were only in Spanish and worrying about what that meant for “the future of America.” It was clear from several of these conversations that the Mexican immigration was viewed

as a normative threat to the United States and that this increased these individuals commitment to the country and what they saw as its principles.

Besides this ethnic diversity and tension, there have also been distinct regional disputes within the United States, with the most famous and costly being that between the southern and northern states regarding the practice of slavery. As slavery became more and more crucial to the southern states' economies and anti-slavery moral sentiment became more and more prominent in the north, the level of "belief diversity," to use Stenner's term, was certainly salient, prompting both sides of the dispute to commit even further to their respective viewpoints. The Civil War did not end the dispute, however, as a white southern backlash emerged in response to the increased presence of "carpetbaggers," northerners who travelled to the South to participate in its reconstruction, "scalawags," southern whites who helped both the Northerners and recently freed blacks in taking power in local governments. This backlash took its most notable form in the organizations of the Ku Klux Klan and the Knights of the White Camellia (Garraty 1995). Such divisions carry on in the present day through labels such as "yankee" and "hick" and the continued controversy over the display of the flag of the Confederacy. White, Protestant, capitalist America was not only threatened by its own various views on slavery, but by the growing population, freedoms, and social prominence of African Americans, from slave revolts to Affirmative Action. Even during the slave era, slaveholders, while having legitimate fears about the resentment and anger felt towards them by their slaves, greatly exaggerated the possibilities and dangers of slave revolts. They viewed blacks as bestial and lascivious and greatly feared both

their physical power and the possibility that they might mate with whites if freed (Garraty 1995).

After the Civil War, even northern whites felt threatened by African Americans, and often treated them harshly, working to engender black militancy and, consequently, further resentment and mistrust within both communities. Even after the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's, which showed a division within white America between those seeking to include individuals from other ethnic backgrounds in the American identity and those seeking to defend American identity as white identity, there still exist deep racial divisions within America.

Such division can clearly be seen in the metropolitan area of St. Louis, Missouri, around which I both grew up and conducted the majority of my American fieldwork. St. Louis is one of the most segregated cities in the United States, with whole areas of the city being almost completely white or black. East St. Louis, Illinois, just across the Mississippi River, for example, is nearly 98% African American, while Dupon, Illinois, a small town less than eight miles to the south is 97% White (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). Further, an African American man in New York City who was raised in North St. Louis, known as a mostly African American area, told me that he did not remember having any significant interaction with a white person until he was thirteen years old.

There exists significant resentment and fear towards African Americans by whites around East Saint Louis, as the city was both predominantly white and prosperous up until a severe economic crisis in the area in the 1960's, which lowered property values, allowed many low income African American families to move in, and produced both

“White flight” and one of the most violent and dangerous cities in the country (Neighborhood Scout website).<sup>71</sup>

In addition to these national divisions based on ethnicity and regional conflict, there has also been a perception by many Americans of a strong normative threat from the economic ideology of communism, which is also frequently viewed as being inextricably linked with atheism among Americans.

In the wake of the First World War, prices fell and unemployment soared in the United States, and the activities of radicals within the labour movement resulted in most Americans associating labour activism with communism (Garraty 1995). Because of the perceived link between communism and atheism, the fact that many of the labour radicals and anarchists at work in the country were not American citizens, and the longstanding capitalist element of Protestant American identity (Albanese 1998), communism was seen by many as intrinsically anti-American. As an anti-American ideology present in the United States, it consequently constituted a normative threat. The perception of threat is made clear by the comments of Lewis Wiley, a New York Times reporter, who said that communists, anarchists, and labour leaders were “joining together with the object of overthrowing the American Government through a bloody revolution and establishing a

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<sup>71</sup> The animosity that many white individuals feel towards African Americans not only reveals the normative threat to notions of American identity that include whiteness, but also works to further the economic insecurity of the country by standing in the way of more comprehensive social welfare policy. Throughout my time growing up in the St. Louis metropolitan area, I heard whites strongly reject both existing and potential social welfare measures, largely because they were thought to allow “welfare queens,” promiscuous African American women who refuse to work and prefer to live off of welfare checks, to continue their free-riding. The prototypical welfare queen that worries so many Americans is not only poor and lazy, but African American, poor, and lazy. The notion of an expanded welfare system threatens many of these white Americans, then, because they feel it would unjustly benefit African Americans at their own expense.

Bolshevist republic” (quoted in Garraty 1995, 685), as well as the abundance of ethnic violence that swept the country.

Decades after this “Red Scare” and after the Second World War had given way to the Cold War between Western countries, led by the United States, and the Soviet Union, Senator Joseph McCarthy expressed the opinions of many Americans in stating “The reason we find ourselves in a position of impotency is not because our only powerful potential enemy has sent men to invade our shores, but rather because of the traitorous actions of those who have been treated so well by this nation” (Quoted in Garraty 1995, 806). These traitorous actions were thought to be carried out by members of the Communist Party within the United States who, according to McCarthy, were “infesting” the State Department.

This strong anti-communist element of American identity has lessened since the era of McCarthyism, as the white, Protestant, capitalist American identity is gradually losing its dominance, but it is by no means absent, as evidenced by the frequent use of the slogan “Kill a Commie for Christ” during the late tumultuous era of the Vietnam War and the continued use of the word “commie,” in addition to “socialist,” as an insult in the 2008 Presidential campaign. During a campaign rally for Presidential candidate John McCain in Pennsylvania, for example, as McCain supporters lined up on a sidewalk outside the venue with supporters of Barack Obama standing with signs on the opposite side of the street, numerous individuals spoke out against both Obama and his supporters as “terrorists,” “European socialists,” “socialist swine,” and “commie faggots” (The Sidewalk to Nowhere 2008).

After the post Second World War economic boom hit the United States, incomes rose, unemployment fell, and most Americans enjoyed unprecedented prosperity and economic security. Yet, despite this, as evidenced above, those holding to the longstanding white, Protestant, capitalist normative order of America have still faced an abundance of normative threats, which have resulted in increased Pro-American, “groupish” behaviour and sentiment among large numbers of people. Given the fact that belief in God is an important part of this identity, such normative threats can increase commitment to belief in God and, consequently, increase the number of CREDs people perform concerning this belief. Moreover, given the fact that two of the significant minority categories in the country’s history, immigrants and African Americans, also have usually had supernatural agent beliefs as an important element in their group identities (Albanese 1998; Patillo-McCoy 1998) and the fact that these groups constantly face the normative threat of living in a largely white country and the economic threats of being much less secure than white Americans, the vast majority of Americans, whatever their ethnic and religious stance, experience at least moderate degrees of normative threat. Consequently, according to work on authoritarianism and threat, the vast majority of Americans should be more strongly committed to their group identities, including their religious elements, than individuals in countries where normative and economic threats are lower. This increased commitment results in both increased levels of supernatural agent beliefs and religious practices among those already holding such beliefs, but also results in the CREDs that are required if such beliefs and practices are to be transmitted to future generations. Thus, even with the economic prosperity of America as a nation, normative threat and group commitment have remained significant and the numbers of

Americans professing to believe in the existence of God has remained mostly unchanged (Norris and Inglehart 2004).

## B) Denmark

One would be hard-pressed to find a nation more different from the United States in matters of both normative and economic threat than Denmark. Rather than needing to create a common identity for individuals from a great variety of nations, ethnicities, and religious denominations, Denmark has possessed throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a rare congruence of national and ethnic borders. Rather than having longstanding animosity between rural and urban sections of the country or between capitalists and labour movements, Denmark developed a ‘collaborative democracy’ between farmers and workers and, later, labour agreements that prevented enduring conflicts (Jespersen 2004). Further, while particular strands in Danish Protestantism helped give rise to the welfare state, which forms the core of contemporary Danish identity, belief in the supernatural agent God has not been a significant element of identity in Denmark for some time. Consequently, when the post-war economic boom finally reached Denmark after, ironically, aid arrived from the United States in the form of the Marshall Plan, economic prosperity came to mostly homogenous society with few longstanding conflicts, allowing the welfare state to flourish for the next several decades.

Denmark’s neighbour Sweden has gone through a somewhat similar process, especially regarding ethnic homogeneity and the flourishing of a social welfare state in the wake of the Second World War (Kent 2008). Both nations, it should be noted, are beginning to face more significant challenges in both the economic and normative

domains, as the level of social welfare enjoyed in the 1960's-1980's is no longer sustainable, significant numbers of immigrants from Third World nations have arrived, and a small minority of Danes and Swedes have gravitated toward more far right, nationalist ideologies. Still, such developments do not alter the fact that over several decades in the second half of the twentieth century, Denmark was a mostly homogenous nation whose citizens enjoyed unprecedented prosperity or the fact that displays of commitment to ingroup ideologies, including religious beliefs, plummeted, causing new generations of Danes to grow up finding God, Jesus, and Allah about as likely to exist as Superman or Mickey Mouse.

Sir James Mellon, who served as the British ambassador to Denmark from 1983-1986, wrote in his personal account of his time in the country that “the Danes are not a nation...they are a tribe, this is the strength of their fellowship and the reason that they have unshakeable trust in each other” (quoted in Jespersen 2004, 6). For Mellon, the Danes more closely resemble the Ashanti in Ghana, whom he had visited prior to his time in Denmark, than they resemble other Europeans in that they show so much concern for the weaker among them, have a strong desire for consensus, show trust in one another, and demonstrate a great deal of uniformity throughout their territory.

Danish historian Knud Jespersen complicates Mellon's view by arguing that this sense of Danish “tribalness,” as well as the homogeneity present in the country, is a socio-historical construction, largely created after the year 1868, rather than a primordial given. Yet he acknowledges that there is much truth in Mellon's account as it reflects the experiences of both citizens of and visitors to Denmark in the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It was by a variety of military defeats, for example, that Denmark came to have such a close congruence between ethnic, linguistic, and national borders. The Kingdom of Denmark was united with both Norway and Sweden in the Kalmar Union from 1397-1523 and, like the other kingdoms of the Union, was largely controlled by the powerful merchants of the Hanseatic League. Upon the dissolution of the Union in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Danish crown ruled over Norway and established a long-standing rivalry with Sweden. After being pulled into the Napoleonic Wars in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, Denmark lost much of its strength and was forced to cede Norway to Sweden, after which Norway declared its independence. Denmark was now a much smaller country populated by mostly ethnic and linguistic Danes. Yet, the nation's contraction was not yet over, for as a result of the rise of vigorous German nationalism in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, many individuals in what was the southern half of Denmark who identified themselves as Germans wished to join the new German nation community. The result was the Schleswigian Wars (1848-1850; 1864) and the ceding of much of what was southern Denmark to Germanic powers. What remained was a small country with a very ethnically and linguistically homogenous population that constructed its common identity not only on ethnicity and language, but also on a common conviction that Denmark now needed to remain modest and neutral in larger world affairs (Jespersen 2004).

For the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and most of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, then, Denmark was a very homogenous country. There was no large, ethnically distinct underclass as there was in the United States after the Civil War and there was very little issue with individuals from different ethnic backgrounds struggling against each other to find jobs in growing cities. The Danish tribe had arrived.

Besides this ethnic and linguistic homogeneity, Denmark also has benefited from a lack of longstanding class conflict and a relatively smooth transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, for example, the Danish government instituted a variety of incentives and punishments that worked to peacefully change Denmark's farming collectives over to the individual ownership of their tenants, a process made easier by the amount of transparency in the government regarding how and why such incentives and punishments were being employed (Jespersen 2004). In fact, most Danes were said at the time to "love the monarchy," and that nothing even approaching the upheaval in France at the time was conceivable in Denmark.

There did exist some labour unrest at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the newly formed Social Democratic party began to have electoral success and backed the Danish Federation of Trade Unions and while the more right-wing government supported the Danish Federation of Employers. Strikes and lockouts swept the country for close to a year, but because of a longstanding Danish law concerning the rights of individuals and collectives to enter into binding agreements without political interference, the trade union and the federation of employers reached both an agreement to end the strife and an understanding that they were the two bodies which would deal with future problems as they arose. The result was that subsequent disputes between workers and employers were always resolved through negotiation rather than conflict and the growing Social Democratic Party, which would dominate Denmark for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, lost its radicalness and became more reform-minded (Jespersen 2004).

The Second World War hit Denmark much less severely than many other European countries, and though it did experience economic hardship in the immediate

wake of the war, the Marshall aid from the United States allowed Denmark to recover and, over the next several decades, flourish economically. This prosperity allowed the largely homogenous, consensus driven country to institute one of the most comprehensive social welfare policies in the world, with extensive unemployment insurance, universal healthcare, pensions, and free education, including graduate school. Being a part of this welfare society is, according to Jespersen, the “first and foremost” element of contemporary Danish identity, alongside ethnicity and language.

As opposed to the United States, belief in God, or any other supernatural agent, is not a significant element of Danish identity. This is made clear not only by widespread Danish non-theism (43-80% of the population) (Zuckerman 2007), but the general lack of interest in matters of religion for the majority of Danes. It is, as many of sociologist Phil Zuckerman’s interviewees and several of my Danish survey participants say, a “non-issue” (Zuckerman 2008). That is, while most Danes still remain nominal members of their national church, as do Swedes, and many Danes desire to be confirmed as teenagers and married in a church as adults, few take national church membership seriously, most desire confirmation for the large amount of money and presents received, and the majority of couples desire a church wedding for the sake of “tradition” and aesthetics rather than any notion of religious propriety.

Yet, as Jespersen argues, it would be a mistake to view religion as a whole as having little to no role in contemporary Danish life and identity. For while belief or non-belief in the existence of God is not an important matter in identifying oneself as a Dane, the strong levels of trust that Danes have both in each other and in their government, as

well as the welfare state itself, have deep roots in the ideas and activities of the Protestant church and its representatives in Danish history.

As opposed to the United States, where it is a near truism that one cannot trust the government, scandals of various types are common place, and one routinely hears exclamations such as “they’re all crooks” during campaign season, Danes have a very high level of trust in the government to do what it says it will do and to do so efficiently. This is evidenced not only by many of my conversations with Danes during my time there but also large, international surveys regarding perceptions of government corruption, the Corruption Perceptions Index, conducted by Transparency International. On a ten point scale, Denmark, Sweden, and New Zealand tied for the most trusted, least corrupt governments in the world with a score of 9.3 (Transparency International Report 2008).<sup>72</sup>

This high degree of trust long predates the contemporary social welfare state in Denmark, as mentioned above in relation to people’s acceptance of vast changes to agriculture in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and has its roots in the role that the Danish Church had in local governmental affairs in the centuries following the Reformation. Within decades of the Reformation, Danish priests were embedded in local communities as civil servants and government contacts. They took an active role in addressing poverty, education, and sickness and, because of their strong ties both to the communities in which they worked and the larger government they represented, they could alleviate social problems efficiently and engender a high degree of trust between the people they served in the community and those they served in power (Jespersen 2004).

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<sup>72</sup> The United States came in eighteenth place with a score of 7.3, while nearly all developing nations scored well under 5.0.

The largest effect of Danish religion on the contemporary welfare state however, comes from the work of one man, Nicolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig, (1783-1872). Grundtvig was a theologian who wrote histories and volumes of Norse legend in his youth and entered into the public sphere as an assembly member and Member of Parliament later in life, gathering a large number of followers and strongly affecting the future of the future Danish nation state. Grundtvig championed a Danish identity based on *Folkelighed*, a term roughly meaning a mixture of popular democracy, folksiness, simplicity, and warmth. He also championed the maxim “First a human—then a Christian” (quoted in Jespersen 2004, 104). Grundtvig realized that creating a nation characterized by *Folkelighed* would require bringing in all of the previously neglected groups of Danish society, such as the rural farmers, into the larger national community. He worked to accomplish this through the establishment of “Folk High Schools,” which he called “schools for life” as opposed to the traditional “schools of death” that catered only to the Danish elite, around the country. The stated purpose of these schools was to turn the masses into knowledgeable and responsible citizens in the emerging democratic Denmark.

Grundtvig’s philosophies and his schools for life were a massive success throughout Denmark, bringing the vast majority of Danish citizens into national affairs and providing them with a common ideology. Furthermore, his ideas strongly influenced much of future activism and politics in Denmark, with leaders of the political parties, such as Frederik Borgbjerg (1866-1936) of the Social Democrats (the party chiefly responsible for the development of the Danish welfare state) labelling themselves as

“Grundtvigians” and intellectuals embracing the notion of *folkelighed*, though, notably, in a secularized version (Jespersen 2004).

The Danish welfare state then, which presently serves as a focal point of Danish national identity, has its roots in the trust of the Danish populace in local priests providing for their needs and the vision of a theologian who argued that proper Christianity involved creating a tight-knit, cohesive national community characterized by warmth and trust, rather than specific notions about the nature of God. In the sense of origins, then, one might say that contemporary Danish national identity is religious. However, my concern in this thesis is with beliefs in the existence of supernatural agency, and it is clear through ethnography, history, and large scale surveys, that such beliefs are not involved in Danish national identity to any significant extent.

With the preceding histories of the United States and Denmark in mind, we can perhaps better understand the statistically significant and substantial differences between the United States and the Scandinavian welfare states such as Denmark in levels of non-theism.

Norris and Inglehart are right to point out the role of existential insecurity in the perpetuation of religious beliefs and behaviours, as such insecurity has been shown to increase individual commitment to ingroup ideologies, including religions, which subsequently results in CREDS of supernatural agent beliefs and the successful transmission of such beliefs from one generation to the next. As both they and Gill and Lundsgaarde show, there exist moderate negative correlations between social welfare measures and measures of religiosity.

Yet, the United States ranks much nearer to existentially secure nations such as Denmark than it does to existentially insecure nations such as Somalia on most of these measures but much nearer to Somalia than Denmark on measures of religiosity. It seems clear that something besides the economic measures of existential security are involved in determining levels of religious belief and behaviour. With the addition of the category of normative threats, as outlined by Karen Stenner to the list of sources of insecurity and increased ingroup commitment, however, we are forced to look beyond per capita GDP and social welfare expenditure and towards the national identities or normative orders present in the United States and the much less religious Scandinavian countries and the levels of threat to these normative orders in the respective countries.

By looking at the dominant national identities in these countries and examining the levels of threat they have experienced, it is apparent that the United States has belief in “God,” however defined, as an important part of its normative order and that this normative order has experienced and continues to experience a substantial amount of threat from ethnic, regional, religious, and political sources. Conversely, Denmark’s national identity does not feature supernatural agent beliefs and, further, the country has experienced much lower levels of threat throughout its history because of its ethnic homogeneity and the lack of large scale and sustained conflicts between social classes.

When economic prosperity and a certain degree of existential security reached the United States in the post Second World War boom, it did not result in similar levels of normative security. There still existed a significant amount of ethnic heterogeneity in the country, with most of the ethnic groups, whites, African Americans, and Hispanic Americans, having belief in God as a central element of their ideological identities.

There still existed regional resentment between the rural southern states and the more urban north in relation to race and religion. And there still existed significant “belief diversity” regarding America’s role in the world, as evidenced by the counterculture and the subsequent culture wars. These continued normative threats continued to boost ingroup commitment to individuals’ respective ingroup identities, the vast majority of which involved God beliefs. With this continued commitment, CREDs towards such beliefs continued to be performed by large numbers of Americans and religious belief and practice, though they have declined to an extent since the post-war boom, have remained much higher than in Europe.

When economic prosperity and existential security reached Denmark and other welfare states such as Sweden, however, it worked to increase normative security. Grundtvig’s beloved folkelighed had been brought to fruition, as the largely homogenous, self-trusting country expressed its solidarity through its extensive welfare provisions for all of its citizens. With both economic and normative security, the Danish people experienced few of the threats that have been shown to increase ingroup commitment, the incentive to participate in religious groups for purposes of social insurance, and the performance of religious actions such as prayer. Given that all of these effects result in a substantial drop in CREDs towards supernatural agent beliefs, it is unsurprising that non-theism has flourished in Denmark. For a great number of Danes, witnessing so few displays of commitment to supernatural agent beliefs during childhood and adolescence has resulted in their viewing the supernatural agents postulated by the world’s religions as more fiction than reality.

## Part II. STRONG ATHEISM

The previous chapters have explored the causal relationships between existential security and the diminishment of commitment to ingroup ideologies and between the diminishment of this commitment and non-theism. Yet, significant numbers of Westerners in the last three centuries have shown a strong commitment to the proposition that religious beliefs are both false and immoral. They have proclaimed this proposition in speech and print and, in some cases, joined civil organizations that have engaged in its propagation. Indeed, commitment to such a proposition is what most Westerners refer to as “atheism,” despite the protests of many self-identified atheists.<sup>73</sup>

It is clear that this “atheism” is a separate phenomenon from the non-theism explored in the previous chapters. It is both possible and not uncommon for an individual to be non-theistic but to not hold the proposition that supernatural agent beliefs are both false and immoral. Many members of more liberal religious groups, for instance, still self-identify as Christians or Muslims while holding definitions of God that make them non-theistic. The key difference between non-theism and what is commonly referred to as “atheism” is the moral stance against such beliefs and the institutions which propagate them. In an attempt to avoid further confusion of such terms, I will label the view that religious beliefs are both false and immoral as “strong atheism.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Many self-identified atheists, as is evident from my survey results, internet forums, and personal discussions, take “atheism” to mean simply the lack of belief in the existence of supernatural agents and actively reject the inclusion of a moral standpoint within the definition. These differences in definition are partially responsible for my labeling this lack of supernatural agent beliefs “non-theism.”

<sup>74</sup> My distinction between non-theism and strong atheism is similar to the more traditional separation of positive and negative atheism (Martin 2007), and implicit and explicit atheism (Smith 1979) in that all of these oppositions involve opposing the mere absence of belief to a belief that supernatural agents do not exist. My distinction is unique in that it stresses the normative component that normally accompanies positive or explicit atheism.

Below, I will present strong atheism in the West as an ideology composed of the descriptive claim that supernatural agents do not exist and two normative claims, the first being that religious beliefs and groups are immoral in that they are oppressive and divisive and the second being that the proper way to form one's beliefs is to limit oneself to evidence and theories consistent with contemporary science.

Further, I will argue that strong atheism's first normative claim results from a combination of specific social and cognitive factors. I will use the work of social psychologist Jonathan Haidt to argue that, rather than changing simply as social conditions change, moral sentiments are constrained by a set of universal moral intuitions. New moral sentiments are not created *ex nihilo* from socio-cultural arrangements or discourses but are rather a joint construction of such arrangements and discourses with these intuitive foundations. Consequently, the changes in moral sentiments that the West has seen over the last several centuries, which has involved a diminishment of ingroup loyalty and deference and a growing motivation to prevent harm and injustice, and which has produced significant criticism of religious organizations, individuals, and practices, can be seen as a shift in emphasis from some intuitive moral foundations to others.

After examining the process by which strong atheist moral convictions arise, I will move on in chapter eight to explore the history of civil society groups devoted to strong atheism and/or to building non-theistic communities. While strong atheism was largely expressed by solitary individuals in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it became a movement with a number of organizations in different countries with the continued development of radical politics in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Strong atheism in organizational and critical form has existed

ever since, though with some more vibrant periods and centres of activity. I will argue, based on both historical records and participant observation, that while there is a great deal of diversity of opinion among non-theists about the merits of strong atheism, there exists an international pattern in levels of strong atheist activity (as measured by numbers of members, meetings, discussions, media presence, and the vociferousness of discourse). Further, I will argue that this international pattern can partially be explained by variations in the levels of normative threat that religious groups pose to the image of proper society that philosopher Charles Taylor labels the “system of mutual benefit” (2007).

## Chapter 6. Distinguishing the Ideology of Strong Atheism

### A Lack of Commitment?

The previous chapters linked non-theism to a lack of strong commitment to ingroup ideologies by calling attention to the importance of exposure to credibility enhancing displays in the transmission of supernatural agent beliefs, the common position of supernatural agent beliefs within ingroup ideologies, and the causal role of existential and normative threats in increasing commitment to such ingroup ideologies. And indeed, one often finds non-theists exhibiting low levels of commitment to many ingroup ideologies.

For example, upon meeting people during my stay in Denmark, the conversation normally turned to what I was doing in the country. I would in such moments say that I was in Denmark in order to study atheism. The most common response I received to this statement was “Atheism? Where are you going to study that?” The implication was that “atheism” is not a common feature of life in Denmark. A representative of one of the few non-theist civil organizations in Denmark confirmed that the great majority of Danes do not like to use the word “atheist” to describe themselves and that this is part of the reason why organizations such as Atheist Meetup-Copenhagen and the *Ateistisk Selskab* or “Atheist Company” have a hard time expanding their membership.

I would normally answer the question about where I was going to study atheism while in Denmark by saying “everywhere,” making the distinction between strong atheism and non-theism, and mentioning the existing data suggesting that Denmark is one of the most non-theistic countries in the world. All agreed with this suggestion but still rejected the term atheist. Though many did not offer their reasons for this rejection, some did and the most common reason given was that atheists sounded “too sure of

themselves.” It was not that these individuals actually granted a significant probability to the existence of supernatural agents; they seemed quite clear that they had no such beliefs and did not see the existence of such agents as at all likely. Rather, the problematic issue was, to quote Henrik, a young professional in Copenhagen, the “hardline” and “enthusiastic” aspect of atheism. “I just don’t look at it as an issue,” Henrik said. “Atheists want to make it an issue.” What Henrik seemed to be implying is that he sees his non-theism as distinct from the position of “atheists,” whom I would call strong atheists, who make it a point to oppose religious beliefs rather than merely not having them. Given such testimony and the small memberships of Danish atheist groups (explored below), it appears that most non-theists in Denmark do not strongly commit to their non-theism by opposing the existence of religion. In fact, many seem to find such commitment off-putting.

Outside of Denmark, non-theists as a whole, both those embracing strong atheism and those not embracing strong atheism, also show a lack of commitment to many ingroup ideologies, including nationalisms. Of the more than 2,500 non-theists who answered questions regarding political affiliation on my online survey, for example, under 5% answered that they were affiliated with their country’s more conservative, nationalistic parties such as the Republican Party in the United States, the Conservative Parties in Canada and the United Kingdom, and the *Dansk Folkeparti* (Danish People’s Party) in Denmark. Further, politics was by far the second most popular discussion topic at the atheist and humanist group meetings I attended in the US, UK, and Denmark and it was always assumed (or already established) that most in attendance were to the left politically, especially on social issues. Further, governments seen to be overly

nationalist, such as George W. Bush's administration in the United States, were frequently criticized. Moreover, several individuals attending the meetings of atheist and rationalist groups in the United States repeatedly made a point of blaming many of the world's ills on the policies of their own country's government.

Even among members of the most ardently strong atheist groups, such as the national organization American Atheists in the United States, commitment to atheism as a group ideology and identity remains lower than many other aspects of individual identity, such as opposition to a particular political party. At the national convention of American Atheists in Minneapolis in 2008, for example, the president of the organization, Ellen Johnson, argued that atheists had to be prepared to not vote in the 2008 presidential election unless one of the candidates made promises to the "atheist community," such as championing the teaching of evolution in public schools, not attending the national prayer breakfast, and assuring that all supreme court nominees would support the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. Johnson's reasoning was that this action is the only way to get politicians to pay attention to the significant voting block of "non-religious" Americans. "Make them know that they cannot count on your vote" she said, in an effort to get atheists to act according to their identity as atheists rather than as Democrats or as anti-Republicans.

The campaign was not successful. Even in the large ballroom at the convention in Minneapolis, among members of her own organization, audible murmuring met such exhortations. I could clearly hear one middle-aged man nearby say "Yeah, right." After the video of her appeal was placed on the internet, several websites, including Friendly Atheist (Mehta 2008) and The Bad Idea Blog ("Don't Listen to Ellen Johnson: Atheists

Should Vote”), posted short essays critiquing Johnson’s approach. The Friendly Atheist post received 66 comments, nearly all of them agreeing with the criticism and many mentioning that the central problem with Johnson’s approach was that it would let the Republicans win and result in a religious conservative being appointed to the Supreme Court. For these atheists, the idea of acting together as “atheists” to attempt to get more respect and concessions from Democratic politicians was not worth the risk of having the Republicans win the election. Their opposition to the prospect of another Republican administration, then, trumped a call for unified action under the identity label “atheist.”

While all of the above examples portray non-theists as not holding strongly to any particular ingroup ideology, even their non-theism, this is, most assuredly, not the case for good numbers of those I will call strong atheists. A look at the bestseller lists and leading media outlets such as the New York Times, Newsweek, and The Guardian, as well as any internet forum dedicated to the discussion of atheism, will reveal the fact that a great many people exhibit a high level of commitment to strong atheism and that there has been a definite increase in strong atheist activity in the last decade, from publishing to attending meetings to posting online messages and essays.

On the bestseller lists, neuroscientist student Sam Harris’ *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (2004) was one of the first publications of the movement that has come to be called the “new atheism” (Wolf 2006), and it stayed on the New York Times Bestseller List for 33 weeks. The book’s central message is a call for a more “rational” society: “We must find our way to a time when faith, without evidence, disgraces anyone who would claim it. Given the present state of our world, there appears to be no other future worth wanting” (Harris 2004, 48). Harris followed *The End of Faith*

two years later with *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2006) to address responses to and criticisms of *The End of Faith*. It entered the New York Times Bestseller List at number seven upon its release.

Oxford biologist Richard Dawkins, after hosting a television program in the UK entitled “The Root of All Evil?,” released *The God Delusion* in 2006. It is the highest selling of all of the recent books of the “new atheist” movement, selling 1.5 million copies by 2007. Dawkins writes in the introduction of the book that its purpose is to “raise consciousness to the fact that to be an atheist is a realistic aspiration, and a brave and splendid one” and for “religious readers who open it [to] be atheists when they put it down” (2006, 1,5).

Journalist Christopher Hitchens followed Dawkins’ lead in 2007 with *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, which reached number one on the New York Times Bestseller List in its third week of release. In it, Hitchens makes clear his views on both the truth and value of religious claims: “The person who is certain, and who claims divine warrant for his certainty, belongs now to the infancy of our species. It may be a long farewell, but it has begun and, like all farewells, should not be protracted” (2007, 11).

These titles are the most well-known and discussed strong atheist books, both among self-identified atheists and in the media, yet they are not alone. Several other books from the standpoint of strong atheism were also released in the same timeframe, including Richard Carrier’s *Sense and Goodness Without God* (2005), Dan Barker’s *Godless* (2008), David Eller’s *Atheism Advanced* (2007), Michel Onfray’s *In Defence of Atheism* (2007), and David Mills *Atheist Universe* (2006).

In the mainstream media, stories and opinion pieces about atheism have grown abundant in the last five years (e.g. Wolf 2006; Goodstein 2009; Fish 2009; Steinfelds 2007; Gray 2007; Hedges 2007). Moreover, with the continued growth of internet logs, or *blogs* for short, numerous blogs devoted to discussing atheism, religion, and science have flourished, including biologist P.Z. Myers' *Pharyngula*, math instructor Hemant Mehta's *The Friendly Atheist*, and Ebonmuse's *Daylight Atheism*, and Richard Dawkins' website, *richarddawkins.net*. All of these sites frequently post news stories related to atheism, religion, secularism, and science with editorial comments and also let readers respond to these articles with comments, giving rise to very lengthy and lively debates and discussions.

As further evidence of the presence and vitality of strong atheism in West, my fieldwork took me to a large convention of nearly 600 atheists in a major American city and to smaller but more frequent atheist meetings across the United States and the United Kingdom. In all of these settings (though, notably, not in Denmark), when it became clear to members of these groups that I was engaged in a project on atheism and was looking to conduct interviews, there was no shortage of willing and, in many cases, quite eager volunteers. On several occasions I was contacted by individuals whom I had not had a chance to interview yet, asking me when they were going to get to have their interview.

Clearly there is some significant degree of commitment to the ideology of strong atheism in the United States and the United Kingdom. But what precisely is this "strong atheism." Above, I briefly described it as the view that religious beliefs were not only false but also immoral and harmful. A fuller description would be that strong atheism is

the philosophical view that supernatural agents do not exist coupled with the normative and, thus, ideological claims that religious beliefs are immoral (in that they are oppressive, authoritarian, divisive, and generally not conducive to human happiness) and that people should base their beliefs on the best available evidence and strive to think “rationally.” Further, these normative claims normally lead individuals to engage in particular types of action, namely campaigning for secular government and a more rational populace. These claims and calls to action are frequently found together in the discourse of strong atheists and form the construct I am labelling “strong atheism.”<sup>75</sup>

### A Sketch of Strong Atheism

#### A) Strong Atheist Claims

We can see strong atheism not only in the best-selling writings of the most famous atheists mentioned above, but also among scientists, media figures, and thousands of everyday atheists from around the world, as responses to my online survey make clear. The Nobel Laureate and physicist Steven Weinberg, for instance, is quoted in the New York Times as saying that “With or without religion, you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion,” and thus arguing that religion is a cause of “evil” that we would be better off without (Goldberg 1999). Comedian and talk show host Bill Maher ends his 2008

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<sup>75</sup> Many atheists have made the same or a similar distinction. The term “strong atheist” is used to designate the phenomenon I discuss here by several atheist groups, including a London group whose members explicitly said in a meeting “We’re all strong atheists here,” as well as the website, [strongatheism.net](http://strongatheism.net). Christopher Hitchens frequently references the phenomenon I call strong atheism as “anti-theism” in his public talks and debates and a small minority of atheists have begun self-identify as anti-theists, including thirteen of my three thousand survey participants.

film, *Religulous*, with a demand for the religious to “Grow up or die” (2008).<sup>76</sup> In this statement, we can see both the claim that religion constitutes a danger for the human species and the claim that religious thinking is somehow childish and that a more mature, grown up way of thinking is offered by science and rationalism.

One of the most forceful expressions of strong atheism I heard during my fieldwork came from an organizer of a strong atheist group in London, who, after a small amount of debate concerning whether or not religion had ever been beneficial for the human species, clearly stated that “there is *nothing* good about religion” with both the intonation and context making clear to all present that one would be placing oneself outside of the norms of the group if they disagreed.

This organizer is most definitely not alone in taking such a view of the moral status of religious belief. As part of my online survey for non-theists, I asked the following question:

“Some non-theists argue that religious beliefs are not only false but also dangerous and oppressive. They argue that the world would be better off without religion. Other non-theists, while agreeing that religious beliefs are false, view religion as neutral or even as a positive and beneficial force in the world. They argue that getting rid of all religious beliefs would do little good and would potentially do great harm. Do you view religious belief as positive, neutral, or negative force in the world?”

Participants were then given several items to rate, such as “religion in general,” “liberal religion,” “Christianity,” and “Islam” and asked to rate them on a scale from -5 (Very Negative), to 0 (Neutral) to +5 (Very Positive). Nearly 20% of the 1,167 participants

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<sup>76</sup> This is not meant as a threat that Maher or anyone under Maher’s command will kill religious people, but rather that religious belief poses such a threat to global civilization that unless it is ended, the inevitable result will be mass death, most likely as a result of terrorists or governments believing themselves to have religious mandates using nuclear weapons.

who answered these questions rated the broadest item, “Religion in General,” with a -5 (Very Negative). A much larger 52% rated the item at or below -3.

Participants were invited to leave comments in order to better specify and contextualize their answers. Their answers frequently contained elements of strong atheism. Many, for instance, were very clear that religious belief is harmful for the human species and we would be better off without it. While some participants only pointed out that religion had caused harm, such as a 26 year old female atheist from Wisconsin who said “People need only look at history and they will see that horrors come from religion and faith,” others stated that religion was inherently harmful, including a 59 year old male atheist from Florida who said, “It’s all bullshit. It’s all harmful. Wars, ignorance, misery. Who needs it?”

Several participants went further than merely saying that religion is harmful and introduced apocalyptic language, stating that religion is “contributing to the downfall of humanity” or that religion, if not opposed, will “lead to the death of us all.”

Many of these same participants suggested that the primary reason for religion being so dangerous and harmful is its reliance on “faith without evidence,” thereby introducing the normative standpoint that there are proper and improper ways of coming to one’s beliefs. A 33 year old male atheist from Sweden, for example, wrote: “I believe religion to be a very dangerous influence because it relies on blind faith, which in our increasingly global society can be very dangerous if large numbers of people can get persuaded in acting on something on pure faith.” A 37 year old male atheist from Ontario concurred: “Belief in anything without verifiable evidence is inherently dangerous. While I recognize that some belief is necessary, because it is not possible to

know everything in advance, that belief should be tested, rather than used as something to base your life on blindly.”

## B) Strong Atheist Identity

It is perhaps unsurprising that strong atheists, who view religious beliefs as harmful to both individuals and to the human species collectively, see themselves as in some ways a collective body, a coalition of “rationally minded” people and religious people as a dangerous “other” to be opposed. “Us” vs. “Them” thinking, then, is commonplace. It is not only a matter of seeing themselves as “grown ups” or “mentally balanced” and religious individuals as “childish,” “soft-headed,” or “bat-shit crazy,” terms which I heard repeatedly in the US, UK, and Denmark, but also a matter of strong atheists having a vision of the way the world should be (secular, rational, free of religious oppression and violence) that they see as being threatened by those with harmful religious beliefs who seek social and political power.

I frequently heard at atheist meetings in the United States in 2008, for example, statements similar to the following from a strong atheist in California: “*the theocrats* are taking over this country and *they’ll* succeed unless *we* do something about it” (emphasis mine). “What is a rational person to do in the face of this lunacy?” asked a female agnostic from London, referring to both Tony Blair’s encouragement of faith-based social services and suggestions from several public figures that Sharia law may have a place in the United Kingdom.

Such “us vs. them” language is also used in the strong atheist effort to encourage others to give up supernatural agent beliefs through conversation and debate. An atheist

from St. Louis, for example, asked his fellow atheists at a small meeting, “How can *we* change *their* minds?” (emphasis mine). This same group collectively watched a 24-part lecture series on rhetoric and argument over a period of several months, all in an effort to “better debate them,” meaning those with religious beliefs.

Viewing the relationship between atheists and the religious as one of conflict and, consequently, a matter of “us vs. them” is not only a basis for action and identity, but also an interpretive framework for discourse concerning such conflicts as secularism vs. theocracy and evolution vs. creationism. This can perhaps best be seen in Richard Dawkins’ response to a humorous animated video, entitled “Beware the Believers,” which was posted to the video sharing site youtube without any information as to its origins or intentions in the run-up to the release of a pro-intelligent design movie entitled *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed* in March of 2008.<sup>77</sup>

The video begins with an animated figure of Dawkins describing to an audience that we are entering the age of the “machine” of science and Darwinism and that any concerns they may have are “both noted and stupid.” To explain the history of this “machine,” Dawkins and other noted atheist and pro-evolution figures such as PZ Myers, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett and Christopher Hitchens begin to rap about the history of the debate between science and religion and evolution vs. creationism, with lyrics such as “Science silenced that *watchdog* wingnut Paley, growing stronger and harder almost daily, storming Wilber by Force as we framed the discourse that faith and science are

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<sup>77</sup> Eventually, the creator of the video made himself known as Mike Edmondson, a film-school graduate in British Columbia. Edmondson created the video for the producers of the film *Expelled* but stated that the video is not out to prove a particular point to anyone and makes fun of both sides (Myers 2008; Owens 2008). This information was not given with the video’s release however, leading to rampant speculation about its background and intent. The video and hundreds of comments on it can be found at <http://richarddawkins.net/article.2409.Beware-the-Believers,RandomSlice>.

split in schismatic divorce” and “We might have lost at Scopes, beaten down by the dopes, and the stooges of popes, but in losin' we coped, becomin' more than we hoped. Creationists slipped on the soap of their own slippery slope,” as well as the catchy chorus of: “Ah he's the Dick to the Dawk to the PhD. He's smarter than you. He's got a science degree! Yeah, he's the Dick to the Dawk to the PhD. He's smarter than you. He studied biology!”

A forum for discussion was created for the video on the site richarddawkins.net that resulted in over eight-hundred comments. Dawkins himself was one of the first to comment on the video, and while many of the atheists that commented found the video to be funny and enjoyed its “equal-opportunity mockery” for both evolutionists and creationists (Myers in Owens, 2008), Dawkins first response was to write: “If anyone can understand a single word of this, don't bother to translate, just tell me whose side it's on.” It is clear that Dawkins’ primary interest in the video, and the interpretive lens through which he hopes to understand it, is in terms of the conflict between religion and science and between evolution and creationism. Rather than, like some other atheists, appreciate or reject the video on comedic or aesthetic grounds, Dawkins seemed mostly concerned with categorizing it as either pro or anti-evolution.

### C) Strong Atheism and Violence

The majority of strong atheists are clear in saying that while they hope and work toward a time when religious beliefs are no more (or that at least out of public life), they do not condone violence towards those ends. Nonetheless, the presence of violent language reveals the depth to which some strong atheists view religious individuals as dangerous

“others.” At the American Atheist convention in Minneapolis, for instance, I overheard a conversation between two attendees about whether or not the atheist “cause” would ever triumph in which one suggested that “what we need to do is get all the fundie wackos in one place, lock ‘em in, and let them tear each other apart.” Another convention attendee, in a response to a question about how atheists should respond to religious proselytizers on university campuses who pass out small bibles and religious tracts, answered:

“Sometimes I’d just like to shove those tracts down their fucking throats. That would be exquisite.”

Further, on richarddawkins.net, a story was posted in August 2009 about eight Christians being burnt to death in Pakistan for supposedly defiling a Koran. One of the first comments was from an AtheistJon, who said: “Well, look at the bright side of life. Whenever religious people kill each other, at least it reduces the religious population by a small amount....If nobody ever killed each other in religious wars, I wonder what the population of the world would be right now? So, we can be thankful it was them, not us” (Two Articles, 2009). This comment was flagged as offensive by several other members of the site and a debate took place about the legitimacy of these statements between AtheistJon and others on the forum, but he was not alone in his views on the forum.

And in the mainstream media, comedian Bill Maher, in reference to the attention given to Angus, a three-year old terrier mix whose backside resembles the figure of Jesus (getbehindjesus.net), stated in his segment “New Rules,” a fixture of his talk show, *Real Time with Bill Maher*, “New Rule. If you see Jesus in your dog’s ass.....it’s you who needs to be chained in the yard.”

#### D) Strong Atheism Contested

Strong atheism, with its moral rejection of religion as both harmful and childish and its frequent use of us vs. them language and its occasional use of violent language, is contested among non-theists in general, and even among those who self-identify as atheists. These disagreements rarely concern the existence of supernatural agents, but rather the normative stance against religion, and they constitute a significant portion of the public discourse on atheism and religion. In fact, these disagreements, specifically over whether or not religion is normally a source of good or ill or whether or not one should attempt to convince people to give up their religious beliefs, dominated most of my initial conversations when Americans and UK citizens learned of my area of research. Further evidence of such disagreements can be found in the public sphere, as the BBC television series “The Big Questions” has hosted several episodes concerning atheism and religion over the last five years, with an episode in July of 2009 addressing the precise disagreements discussed here entitled “Is Atheism an Intolerant Belief?” (2009).

One public representative of the view that strong atheism is intolerant comes from self-identified “failed atheist,” radio presenter and author John Humphrys, who hosted a radio series in 2006 entitled “Humphrys in Search of God,” and one year later released *In God We Doubt: Confessions of a Failed Atheist* (2007). In the book, Humphrys states that atheists have all the best arguments and that anyone can see the “holes” riddling the monotheistic traditions, most notably the problem of evil, but he argues that religious people should not be thought “stupid” or “childish” for believing in God. Further, he argues that while the world would be better off without religious extremism, the atheists’

claim that “without religion peace and harmony would reign is patently absurd” (2007, 325).

Humphrys is not alone in many of his views on strong atheism, as numerous individuals answered survey questions asking them to evaluate the moral status of “religion in general” with statements about the good religious beliefs can bring to an individual and how generalizing about “religion in general,” which many strong atheists are happy to do, is “absurd.” A 35 year old male atheist from Denmark, for example, wrote that “Religion is slightly silly. But if it makes people happy, I’m glad it helps them.” A 54 year old male atheist from New Mexico, meanwhile, declined to rate individual religions or religion in general on the degree to which they can be seen as positive or negative, commenting that “I can’t answer these questions in the form they are presented. It depends on the historical context. Classical civilization lacked respect for compassion, which Christianity introduced. Yet Christians have used torture against “heretics.” To say that “religious belief in general” has been good or bad is absurd—you need to specify a place and time.”

It is clear, then, that while non-theists may share, by definition, a lack of belief in the existence of supernatural agents, they do not share an identical or even similar set of beliefs concerning the moral status of religious belief. Many non-theists are also strong atheists, actively opposed to religious beliefs in both principle and in the public sphere. Other non-theists reject strong atheism, arguing that it represents an unjustified essentializing of religion and/or a strident and somewhat mean-spirited attempt to take away solace from religious believers.

#### E) Strong Atheism as One Cause of Non-theism

The strong atheism outlined above does not only exist alongside non-theism as an independent phenomenon. For a significant minority of non-theists, a moral rejection of religion as harmful to human well-being and happiness actually worked to turn them from theists to non-theists. In other words, the moral outrage at religion underlying strong atheism is an important cause of some individuals losing their explicit beliefs in the existence of supernatural agency, alongside or in some cases in spite of their exposure to a relatively high level of CREDs.

The notion of atheism as being primarily a matter of moral outrage against religion is actually a common one among Christian apologists, including theologian Alister McGrath (2004) and social philosopher Charles Taylor (2007). Such analyses ignore the development of non-theism without strong atheism in many countries, most notably Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, and the correlations identified by Norris and Inglehart and Gil and Lundsgaarde regarding existential security and welfare spending. Therefore, they are quite limited in their ability to explain non-theism in general. Yet, they are instructive in that they reveal strong atheism to be a significant historical phenomenon and, for some, a cause of defection from religious communities and abandonment of religious beliefs.

That many individuals have left their religious beliefs and affiliations behind for moral, in addition to, or rather, than intellectual reasons can be seen both in the historical records left by such individuals in the Victorian Age as well as answers to relevant questions within my non-theist survey.

Historian Howard Murphy examines the personal writings of three British freethinkers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Francis William Newman (1805-1897), James Anthony Froude (1818-1894), and Mary Ann Evans (1819-1880), and finds that, for all three, a moral repugnance of doctrines of eternal damnation and substitutionary atonement drove them from their traditional faith. Only later did they concern themselves with the matter of Christianity's doctrines being true or false (Murphy 1955). Similarly, historian Susan Budd examined the obituaries of fifty secularists in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in order to better understand the original reasons why secularists left their religious communities and joined the secularist cause.<sup>78</sup> She found that the "crucial" element of their leaving the religion and joining secularist groups was a realization that both the Bible, their ministers, and religion in general were morally wrong and had a "warping effect on humanity, which would benefit by its complete disappearance," (Budd 1967). She also found that this moral rejection preceded their conviction that their beliefs were factually wrong.

Many contemporary non-theists have undergone a similar process. As part of my online non-theist survey, I asked the following question:

Some non-theists report morally rejecting religion prior to intellectually rejecting it. For example, one atheist who was raised religious rejected the Christian God as oppressive and authoritarian at 13. It was not until age 16 that she became convinced that Christian beliefs, and all other supernatural beliefs, were factually wrong. Other non-theists report that their moral rejection of religious beliefs came after their intellectual rejection. Did you have moral objections to religious beliefs or religious people before you came to think that religious beliefs were most likely wrong?

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<sup>78</sup> Budd was able to examine these reasons because of the common practice among atheist, rationalist, and secularist groups for members to give their "testimonial" or "coming out" story to other members, who then helped write the obituaries for the deceased members.

Participants were given the following answer choices: a) Intellectual rejection first, b) Intellectual and moral rejection at the same time, c) Moral rejection first, and d) Not applicable. Of the 1495 people who answered the question, 736 answered that they had an intellectual rejection first, while 311 answered that they had had the intellectual and moral rejection at the same time and 272 participants answered that they had a moral rejection prior to their intellectual rejection.

This question was immediately followed by the question: “If you did have moral objections prior to having intellectual rejection, how important do you think your moral rejection was in leading you to become a non-theist?” The answer choices were a) Not important at all, b) Somewhat important, c) Moderately important, and d) Very important. Of the 483 individuals who answered this question,<sup>79</sup> only 45 answered that it was not important at all, while 148 answered that it was somewhat important, 111 answered that it was moderately important, and the largest number of respondents, 179, responded that their moral rejection of religion was very important in their becoming non-theists.

All respondents were asked but not required to provide further comments about their answers. By far the most common response among those who had had a moral rejection of religion prior to an intellectual rejection was that a moral distaste fuelled their exploration of the intellectual issues surrounding religion, giving them the necessary motivation to investigate the intellectual foundations of the beliefs, which they then found wanting. A 38 year old male Bright from California, for instance, wrote that his

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<sup>79</sup> This question was located on the same page as the previous question and was likely skipped by many of those who answered that they had had an intellectual rejection of religion prior to a moral one or those who answered that the question did not apply to them, presumably because they do not have a moral rejection of religion.

moral rejection “was the catalyst that started the intellectual change,” while a 26 year old female atheist from Wisconsin answered that “If you have an automatic distaste for something, you should take a good, honest, hard look into why that is, where it comes from,” and a 44 year old male atheist from the Netherlands answered that “after the moral rejection I looked somewhere else to find answers and found them in science, in a naturalistic view of the universe.”

A smaller number of these individuals argued that they would have intellectually rejected religious beliefs eventually, even without the moral rejection. “In time,” said a 65 year old male humanist from California, “I would have perceived the contradictions of a literal reading of the bible anyway.” Such confidence in their own rational abilities fits well with the widely held belief among strong atheists that their views on the existence of supernatural agents are the product of rational thought rather than any type of emotional reaction, which is one of the charges they frequently level against the religious. Several individuals, for instance, took issue with the fact that I said I was interested in understanding the “psychology and anthropology of atheism” and “how different factors can affect our beliefs.” They argued that their atheism was a result of critical thinking and critical thinking only, and some went as far as to suspect me of being a religious scholar interested in why people “turn from the true faith.”

While such statements are interesting in their own right as examples of the normative stance towards how one is to come to one’s beliefs, which will be explored more fully below, such statements also suggest that the numbers of individuals having a moral rejection of religion prior to an intellectual one may be larger than the numbers on the survey indicated. That is, since non-theists knew they were being interviewed or

surveyed as non-theists and there exists among non-theists a notion of the virtue of rational thinking, it is likely that some people were motivated to conceal their primary moral objection for fear of appearing “irrational” in their beliefs. While such evidence does not support the hypothesis that not believing in the existence of supernatural agents is primarily a matter of moral outrage for most or all atheists, it does suggest that, for some, this moral rejection is a type of catalyst toward closer intellectual scrutiny.

### The Two Normative Stances of Strong Atheism

The questions I am concerned with regarding strong atheism are similar to the questions I was concerned with in relation to non-theism. How does strong atheism come about historically and psychologically and why do we tend to see more of it in some contexts? In order to fruitfully address these explanatory questions, I will need to carve strong atheism at its joints, dividing it into its two normative elements.

The first and most easily discernable normative stance among strong atheists concerns the harms that religious beliefs and practices are seen to cause. It is the view that religions, in either all or the vast majority of cases, oppress individual freedoms, cause individual suffering, and violate principles of fairness. We can see the first normative stance in the writings of many non-theists, and especially among strong atheists, both in current and historical writings. Yet, it is important to note that this first normative stance is not solely a feature of strong atheists or even non-theists; it is a stance shared by many self-identifying “liberal” theists as well.

The second and less easily discernable normative stance among strong atheists concerns a right and wrong way of addressing questions and establishing one’s beliefs. It

is the view that aligning and limiting one's beliefs about the world to those supported by scientific evidence is responsible, mature, and good, while allowing oneself to believe in entities or events, such as supernatural agents or the afterlife, for which there is no scientific evidence is dangerous, immature, and bad. It is this second normative stance that, combined with the first, separates strong atheists from other non-theists and liberal theists.<sup>80</sup>

#### A) Harmful Religion

In an often-quoted paragraph of *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins offers his moral objections to the God of the Hebrew Bible. Dawkins labels him as “jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully” (2006, 31). For Dawkins and many other atheists who referenced this quote in conversation or interviews, the Bible reveals a God undeserving of respect or adoration, as he is clearly outside the bounds of moral behaviour in his orders to have whole populations of people

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<sup>80</sup> These two moral stances are evident in the social actions that strong atheists take up, campaigning for secularism in government and trying to convince the public to think more “rationally” and “sceptically.” In relation to secularism, strong atheist Madalyn Murray O’Hair sued in order to get prayer out of public schools in the US in the 1960’s, while Michael Nedow has for some time been seeking to have the words “under God” taken out of the pledge of allegiance. Atheist groups also frequently encourage members to write to their governments in opposition to public displays of religious endorsement or blasphemy laws. In relation to encouraging rationality, some atheist groups encourage members to learn better debating skills while others include members who swap stories about their attempts to “raise consciousness” in the workplace, such as by telling Christians “Happy Zombie Day” around Easter or, perhaps more politely, always asking for rational justification when religious acquaintances invoke God in conversation.

killed for opposing the Hebrews or for having two bears maul more than forty children for calling his prophet Elisha “bald head.”<sup>81</sup>

While the above examples deal specifically with the immorality of the Judaeo-Christian God, he is not the only source of moral outrage for strong atheists. Specific religious doctrines and the behaviour of religious people also trigger moral outrage among strong atheists. The notion of eternal punishment in hell, for instance, morally offends many Westerners, both atheist and theist alike. One atheist from St. Louis, for instance, told me that the idea that people will go to hell and have no chance of escape for all of eternity simply for something they did or did not do or something they did or did not believe while on earth was “monstrous.” Another atheist, this one from California, was concerned not only with the status of the doctrine itself, but its effects on children: “I cannot believe that this idea is told to children. Imagine the suffering they must go through at night, worrying about whether or not they will be sent to hell, just for the normal mischief they do as children. Hell, I remember one of my friends. She was wracked by guilt and worry for masturbating as a teenager, thinking that it would send her to hell. Religious morality is just evil. Plain and simple.”

The actions of religious people are perhaps discussed most often among strong atheists, both in face to face meetings and online forums. This is perhaps partially because of the fact that most are familiar with the moral issues raised by religious texts and dogmas, while new incidents of religious people behaving in a manner they see as immoral are more novel and attention demanding. Yet, part of the explanation also lies

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<sup>81</sup> This latter story in particular, taken from 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings Chapter Two, was a frequent topic of discussion at the 2008 American Atheists national convention, as on sale at the convention book table was a slim volume entitled, *Illustrated Stories from the Bible (that they wont tell you in Sunday School)* (Farrell 2005), which had on its cover a graphic illustration of two bears dismembering and eating several small children.

in the fact that such news stories are posted with great frequency on atheist websites and blogs, such as richarddawkins.net, Pharyngula, and the Friendly Atheist. Whether it is a story of how a young girl is forced to run away from her Muslim parents to avoid being the victim of an honour killing (Netter 2009; Atheist Media Blog), or a family holding down and choking a three year old girl as part of an exorcism (Associated Press 2007; Mehta 2007), strong atheists share such stories with each other and comment on how such incidents constitute damning evidence for the inherent immorality of religious beliefs and people.

In all of the above stories, the charge against religion is that it is harmful to human beings. It leads to parents not caring for their children, but choking them and beating them in order to “get the devil out.” The religious message is not one of love and empathy, but of threats, whether the threat is killing someone for apostasy or of telling them that they will face eternal suffering in hell. Religion does not appear to teach equality but rather the oppression of women through the wearing of burqas and the demand that a wife be subservient to her husband.

Such moral condemnation of religion is by no means only a product of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Rather, such sentiments can clearly be seen in the last several centuries. Thomas Paine, radical of both the American and French Revolutions, wrote in *The Age of Reason* that “the declaration which says that God visits the sins of the fathers upon the children is contrary to every principle of moral justice” (1794 (1988)). Francis Newman, one of the freethinkers discussed by historian Howard Murphy, is offended by the notion of substitutionary atonement as barbaric: “I shuddered at the notions with I had once imbibed as a part of religion; and then got comfort from the inference, how much better

the men of this century are than their creed. Their creed was the product of ages of cruelty and credulity; and it sufficiently bears that stamp” (quoted in Murphy 1955). Similarly, Mary Ann Evans’ stresses in one of her letters in 1841 that she “cannot rank among my principles of action a fear of vengeance eternal, gratitude for predestined salvation, or a revelation of future glories as a reward,” though she does still “fully participate in the belief that the only heaven here, or hereafter, is to be found in conformity with the will of the Supreme” (quoted in Murphy 1955).

One of the most forceful expressions of the strong atheist moral rejection of theistic belief in history, ironically, comes from the pen of a Russian Orthodox Christian, Fyodor Dostoevsky, whose most widely acclaimed novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), features a sharp moral rebuke of the way religions justify and even glorify suffering from the character Ivan Karamazov, an atheist, in a conversation with his brother, Alyosha, who is a novice at a nearby monastery. The attack is a version of the philosophical problem of evil, that is, the problem of how an all-powerful and all-knowing god could also be all-good, given the events of the world. Rather than arguing that evil proves God does not exist, however, Ivan says that he accepts the existence of God but refuses to participate in God’s creation because of his moral outrage at its evil.

Ivan describes in detail to his brother several horrifying situations of abuse to children, detailing their suffering at the hands of oppressors. He relates a story of how Turks in Bulgaria had slaughtered Slavic babies in front of their mothers, either cutting them from their mother’s wombs or throwing them into the air “to impale them on the points of their bayonets before their mothers’ very eyes,” as well as a story of a young girl locked in an outhouse at night and forced to eat her own excrement by her parents

because of her bedwetting. Ivan argues that such abuses demand retribution, but that God, if he exists, puts off such retribution to some future inaccessible state, while the religious say that such suffering is necessary to bring forth some greater, eternal harmony. Ivan's moral "rebellion" is his response to this situation:

"I absolutely reject that higher harmony. It's not worth one little tear from one single tortured child, beating its breast with its little fists in its foul-smelling lock up, and praying with its unexpiated tears to its 'Dear Farther God!' .....no truth is worth this price. The price of harmony has been set too high, we can't afford the entrance fee. And that's why I hasten to return my entry ticket. If I ever want to call myself an honest man, I have to hand it back as soon as possible. And that's exactly what I'm doing. It's not that I don't accept God, Alyosha; I'm just, with the utmost respect, handing Him back my ticket." (Dostoevsky 1880 (1994), 307-308)

After Alyosha labels such a statement "rebellion," Ivan challenges his brother:

"Tell me straight out, I call on you—answer me: imagine that you yourself are building the edifice of human destiny with the object of making people happy in the finale, of giving them peace and rest at last, but for that you must inevitably and unavoidably torture just one tiny creature, that same child who was beating her chest with her little fist, and raise your edifice on the foundation of her unrequited tears—would you agree to be the architect on such conditions? Tell me the truth?"

While presumably this attack on claims of "necessary suffering" is meant to reflect atheistic arguments occurring at the time, rather than Dostoevsky's own views, it has also served as a cultural touchstone for some atheists who make reference to "returning the ticket" in relationship to the problem of evil and their own feelings towards religion. Christopher Hitchens, in *God is Not Great*, for instance, argues that while Alyosha answers his brother's challenge by saying, softly, that he would not agree to such a situation, we must answer the same, "only not... so softly" (Hitchens 2007, 228).

Moreover, in a spontaneous conversation I had with a strong atheist at the American Atheist convention in Minneapolis, the ticket was more forcefully returned: “I don’t think there is a God or gods. But if there is, he’s a fucking monster and I’ll tell him where he can stick his ticket. And these religious people, believing this stuff? That we all deserve to go to hell but we can be saved because God forced somebody to suffer all kinds of pain on a cross? What kind of person do you have to be to think that that kind of universe is acceptable? It’s just disgusting.”

For strong atheists, God, if he exists, particular religious claims such as the existence of eternal punishment, and the actions and moral sentiments of religious people are all cause for moral outrage. The toleration of harm, suffering, and prejudice, either for some divine purpose or merely for the purpose of keeping family honour or attempting to avoid divine punishment is, for many atheists, immoral. And many have few qualms in saying so.

Strong atheists, however, are not alone in this moral condemnation, as many self-identified theists, Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus, among others, share their moral repugnance. One of the most common responses to the charges strong atheists make against religion from theists, for example, is for theists to say “that’s not my God (or religion, Christianity, Islam, etc.)” and proceed to outline their theologies not involving eternal punishment, honour killing, or strict enforcement of behavioural norms. Many theologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in fact, such as liberation theology in Latin America (Gutiérrez 1988), Black liberation theology in the United States (Cone 1997), and liberal Christianity in general (Spong 1991; Hans Küng 1990), take as their most dominant values the liberation of individuals from oppression, whether that be from social and

racial oppression or the oppression of individual guilt from what they see as outdated moral proscriptions.

While atheists argue with such liberal “religionists” that they are still in the grips of irrational thinking and, more commonly in the last five years, that their beliefs “give cover” for the insanity that is fundamentalism (Harris 2004; 2007), it appears that one can possess the same moral emphasis on perceived suffering, harm, and oppression while still maintaining a belief in some sort of supernatural agency as well as affiliation with a religious tradition.

#### B) “Soft-headed” religion

Of course, liberal theists are not strong atheists. What distinguishes the two is not only the fact that liberal theists believe in the existence of some supernatural agency, however defined, and strong atheists do not, but also the fact that strong atheists see religious beliefs, from the most fundamentalist to the most liberal, as forms of “deluded thinking” and “childish wish-fulfilment.” For strong atheists, there is a clear right way and wrong way to go about establishing one’s beliefs about the world. One is mature, responsible, and virtuous while the other is childish, fanciful, and potentially dangerous.

During a July 2009 filming of the BBC show, *The Big Questions*, for instance, an audience member complained that she had frequently been called “soft-headed” by atheists in the UK. And while many individuals speaking for atheism in the public sphere, such as Professor John Adams of the North Yorkshire Humanist Association, seek to minimize the association between atheism and such attacks on the mental

capacities of the religious, this is the generally accepted notion at meetings of atheists in both the US and the UK, as well as internationally accessible online message boards.

“How dumb do you have to be to think that the Bible is literally true? C’mon!” said an exasperated atheist in St. Louis after hearing of children being home schooled by religious parents and being taught that the Bible was inerrant. This notion, that religious beliefs are the product of some sort of mental defect such as a lack of intelligence or rationality, is widespread among strong atheists, and many take as one of their goals in life to “increase rational thinking in the world.”

Yet, along with this common notion of religious beliefs reflecting a the lack of intelligence or rational abilities, there also exists for most strong atheists a notion that religious beliefs are the result of a weakness of character on the part of the religious. “I guess some people just can’t face reality. They’re just that weak” stated an atheist in St. Louis. “Well, I just refuse to believe in something just because it’s comforting,” said an agnostic in San Francisco with an obvious sense of pride. After a young man in St. Louis related his story of gradually moving away from Christianity and then later all supernatural beliefs, he was asked by others at the meeting, “Well, have you grown up? Have you grown out of it? Are you thinking rationally now?” All such statements reveal not only a belief that religious beliefs are factually wrong, but a belief that believing in comforting illusions or anything that does not have verifiable evidential support is a type of childish weakness, a weakness that one can take pride in overcoming. They, the atheists, can face reality. They are not weak. They refuse to believe in something just because it is comforting. They have grown out of it.

Such sentiments are also found online and in the writings of the most prominent atheists. A member of the site Yahoo Answers, which allows users to pose a question, receive answers, and for members to rate and choose the best answers, posed the question, “Religion is a crutch for the weak mind,?” and members chose as the best answer the following:

“Well exactly. Why else would people bother, they believe it all because they want to, its self-delusion. Religion is all cozy and warm for them and means the don’t have to start asking hard questions about life. It’s all there ready in a book. How pathetic is that?” (Yahoo Answers)

Similarly, a blogger named Blackquill wrote that:

“I have come to the conclusion that most religious people are weak minded whiners who are so scared to face the realities of life that they need a psychological crutch in whatever they do.” (Religious People: Are They Weak Minded?)

Christopher Hitchens, as mentioned above, labels religious beliefs relics from the “infancy” of our species. Similarly, Richard Dawkins writes that “there is something infantile in the presumption that [God] has a responsibility to give your life meaning and point” and that “the truly adult view, by contrast, is that our life is as meaningful, as full and as wonderful as we choose to make it” (2006, 360). Further, in response to the question “Is there any harm in a system of belief...that gives people hope...that gives them a sense of order and continuity” in a BBC interview in 2009, Dawkins responded that while there may not be any inherent harm, such a question is analogous to asking whether you would “like your doctor to tell you the truth about what you’ve got. Some of us would wish to be told the truth. If you’d like to hide behind an illusion...it’s just the same argument that doctors should lie to their patients when they have terminal cancer. I’m not sure that I would wish that” (BBC Newsnight). Again, it is clear that

religious beliefs are seen to be at least partially the result of a lack of character and strength on the part of the religious. It is a crutch for the weak mind, an infantile presumption rather than adult conclusion; it is the result of hiding from an unpleasant but necessary truth.

In opposition to such weak-minded religious people, strong atheists see themselves as strong minded and cognitively virtuous in that they accept the world as it is. “I don’t hide from facts” said a young atheist woman from New York City with an obvious sense of pride. Richard Dawkins, in his August 2009 BBC interview, was quite forthcoming in his normative claim that “People ought to think rationally and sceptically” (BBC Newsnight). The intent was clearly not that only certain people must think rationally and sceptically in some areas of their lives to accomplish certain goals, but that thinking rationally and sceptically in all areas of life is a virtue to which we should all aspire.

The strong atheist assertion that the proper way to establish one’s beliefs is through evidence, and more specifically the evidence provided by the sciences, is clearly displayed in the answers provided to the question “Please describe why you feel your position (such as atheism, agnosticism, non-theism) is the correct one” within my online survey. Of the 2,519 responses, 1234 mention the lack of either “evidence” or “proof,” such as “There is no proof” and “It is correct for me because I have seen no scientific evidence of any God(s) existing.” Moreover, many of the response that do not contain those words share the same sentiment, such as the one word answer, “Science,” and “I don’t believe in taking something on faith.” When asked to justify their lack of belief in the existence of supernatural agents, most non-theists reveal their assumptions about how

one should come to their beliefs and how those beliefs should be justified. What is clear from their answers is that the proper method of justification is to examine the evidence on offer from the sciences, the “facts of the real world,” as one atheist from Florida put it, and see if there is any indication of the existence of such agency.

Even further evidence of this norm can be seen in atheists’ frequent problems with my introducing my research by mentioning anthropology and psychology and making the assumption that many factors besides the rational examination of evidence can affect our beliefs. When atheists had a problem with this, it was clear that they were not merely disagreeing with me, but that they were emotionally aroused by my suggestion. They were quite proud of the fact that their views were the result of rational thought and examination of the evidence, and were slightly offended at the suggestion that their views may also have been crafted by non-rational mechanisms.

This view is not a new one. Rather, it appears to have roots in the Victorian Age, when a virtue, masculine in connotation, was created out of “looking facts in the face” and avoiding the weakness of sentimentality. Charles Eliot Norton (1827-1908), for instance, referred frequently in his letters to the “unmanliness” of religious belief (Turner 1985). Examining the period, historian James Turner notes that it was “the moral principle—that a person ought not to believe on insufficient evidence—that dictated the intellectual standards applied to belief and thus made knowledge of God problematical in the first place” (204). This could be seen from public lectures entitled “The Ethics of Belief,” which stressed “the dishonesty of treating as positive fact, dogmas which are matters of doubt or dispute” to lectures among freethinkers that stressed “a love of knowledge, amounting to sincerity of mind; a desire to escape the false, and wisely life in

the true,” (Quoted in Turner 214). Indeed, just after the Victorian Age, in 1907, William James, psychologist and philosopher William James presented his “philosophical temperament” of pragmatism, seeking to navigate between the Scylla of “Tender-mindedness” and the Charybdis of “tough-mindedness,” which is characterized as taking “facts” as one’s “alpha and omega” (James and Olin 1992). For Turner, it is clear that what the atheists and agnostics of the Victorian age in Britain and America were insisting was that “it is always and everywhere wrong to believe what we do not know” (1985, 215).

As several historians, including Charles Taylor and James Turner, have noted, the masculine virtuousness of “tough-mindedness” did not emerge automatically with the emergence of public atheism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Rather, such a normative stance has its roots in a common view of masculinity in the Victorian Age and in Victorian religion in particular. There was already, Taylor notes, a strong concern with temptation and weakness within evangelical Christianity, in which the virtue of self-control was continually stressed (2007). Yet, the Victorian age saw the development of a particular type of masculine virtue or “manliness,” that opposed itself to dangerous but stereotypically male qualities such as strong sexuality and aggressiveness (Mangan 1991; Sussman 1992). To be manly was to have a certain stoic hardiness, not only in body, but also in mind, resistant to emotions and desires. This virtue can clearly be seen in the development of what has come to be known as “muscular Christianity” in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as writers Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes both stressed the development of both physical and moral strength for the British Christian male as a necessity for the continued success of British imperialism, which they saw as being

threatened by the effeminacy being bred in urban areas and tolerated by the Anglican Church (Putney 2001; Watson et al 2005). Being physically active in team sports was supposed by Kingsley to allow “boys [to] acquire virtues which no books can give them; not merely daring and endurance, but, better still temper, self-restraint, fairness, honour, unenvious approbation of another’s success, and all that ‘give and take’ of life which stand a man in good stead when he goes forth into the world, and without which, indeed, his success is always maimed and partial” (Kingsley quoted in Watson et al 2005).

According to both Turner (1985) and Taylor (2007), this general view of Victorian masculinity, and muscular Christianity in particular, are important elements in the explanation of how atheism and agnosticism were able to grow so substantially in the later half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For the great many individuals who had internalized these views of proper masculinity, hearing about evolution and science, combined with the charges of childishness seemed to “hit a target in their own religious life” (Taylor 365). Suddenly the Christianity that seemed so important to virtuousness was actually a determinant to it, as accepting propositions on faith, rather than “looking facts in the face” (Mill quoted in Taylor 365), implied a weakness and immaturity that no virtuous man would exhibit. These sentiments are most clearly seen in the work of agnostic Leslie Stephen, an avid mountain climber and associate of Charles Kingsley who left the Christian tradition in his thirties and wrote in *An Agnostics Apology* (1867):

“Who would not be happy in accepting this belief [that God will bring harmony out of all of this darkness], if he could accept it honestly? Who would not be glad if he could say with confidence ‘the evil is transitory, the good eternal: our doubts are due to limitations destined to be abolished, and the world is really an embodiment of love and wisdom, however dark it may appear to our faculties’? And yet, if the so-called

knowledge be illusory, are we not bound by the most sacred obligations to recognize the facts... Dreams may be pleasanter for the moment than realities; but happiness must be won by adapting our lives to the realities. And who, that has felt the burden of existence, and suffered under well-meant efforts at consolation, will deny that such consolations are the bitterest of mockeries?" (Stephens in Joshi 2000, 36)

Strong atheism, then, is constituted not only by a lack of belief in the existence of supernatural agency, or in some cases a positive denial of the existence of supernatural agency, but also by two normative stances, the view that religious beliefs are harmful and oppressive and, consequently, immoral, and the view that religious beliefs are childish and betray a weakness of character. Historians and philosophers, as discussed above, offered accounts of the historical factors giving rise to this latter view by pointing to the creation of the virtue of masculine scepticism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, the questions of how the crucial former view came about in history and how it comes to exist in the minds of individuals remain today.

## Chapter 7. Strong Atheism: Moral Foundations

Throughout history, religious identification, whether through belief or ritual participation, has been an important marker of social identity and status as a “moral” person, from the trial of Socrates for the “corruption” of Athenian youth. Given this common link, the fact that so many people in so many countries today judge many religious doctrines, behaviours, and people to be immoral presents a puzzle. How does such a drastic moral shift arise?

### The Effects of Social Structures

For most social anthropologists, such a shift should hardly be considered a puzzle, as moral sentiments, like most aspects of human life, reflect the social and cultural conditions in which their bearers live. Social anthropologists, for example, do not find most philosophers of morality useful in understanding human moral sentiments because philosophers “do not concern themselves with locating the moral subject within social and cultural worlds” (Howell 1997, 8). This rejection of the usefulness of philosophy stems from the realization that moral judgments are strongly affected by beliefs concerning the nature of the individual person and their relationship to wider society. Western moral philosophy views morality as a matter of individuals and their actions and assumes all individuals are somehow equal under the moral law. In the large number of non-Western societies in which such individualism and egalitarianism are absent,

morality looks rather different, and whether or not an act is viewed as immoral is strongly affected by what place the agent has in society (Howell 1997; Parkin 1985).<sup>82</sup>

It is not surprising, then, to find sociologists, anthropologists, and historians linking the rise of new moral sentiments to new socio-cultural conditions. Given the massive social upheavals in Western civilization from the Reformation to the rise of nation states to industrialization and globalization, and given the changing demands such circumstances make on individuals, the standards by which Westerners judged each others' behaviour would be forced to change. From some of the earliest practitioners of social science, such as Émile Durkheim and Ferdinand Tönnies, to contemporary social historians and psychologists such as Charles Taylor and Jonathan Haidt, the roots of the moral sentiments that judge religious beliefs and institutions as immoral are located in the changing social realities of the West.

For French sociologist Émile Durkheim, the rise of a moral worldview that judges religious and other institutions as oppressive to individual rights and happiness coincides with the shift in the type of social bonds between individuals that comes with industrialization. In *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893 (1933)), Durkheim argues that there exist two distinct types of social solidarity, or bonds between individuals, one dominant throughout much of the world for most of human history and the other a more recent development of Western civilization. Durkheim's distinction, similar in many ways to that made by German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies between *gemeinschaft* (community) and *gesellschaft* (civil society) (1887), is between what he calls mechanical and organic solidarity.

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<sup>82</sup> Despite this emphasis on the socio-cultural relativity of moral norms, most anthropologists still hold that "humans everywhere are cognitive and emotionally predisposed towards moral sensibility" (Howell 1998, 10).

In societies characterized by mechanical solidarity, the social bonds and obligations between individuals are mostly based on common identity, such as a kinship group and shared religious understanding. Such groups are normally small and somewhat isolated with significant overlap between religious, political, and economic spheres of activity, a lack of individual autonomy and privacy, relative uniformity in practices and attitudes, and repressive sanctions punishing individual transgressions (Morrison 2006, 165). Conversely, in societies characterized by organic solidarity, the social bonds and obligations between individuals are mostly based on the occupational roles these individuals serve within a larger system with significant division of labour and the contracts they establish between them. Such societies have large populations with specialized and therefore more interdependent members, with increased autonomy based on laws establishing individual rights and freedoms and laws concerned more with restitution than repression (Morrison 168).

Durkheim saw the growth of organic solidarity being linked closely with the increase in population density and the rise of cities in Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As individuals from different kinship lineages and religious affiliations lived closer together and were made to cooperate under more centralized political authorities, the obligations and sanctions of their previous affiliations became a hindrance to cooperation and, consequently, the “gaps” between different mechanically solid groups lessened and the importance of such obligations and sanctions diminished (Durkheim 1893: 1933, 258-260).

The moral results of this shift, Durkheim argues, is that religious rules lose their importance in providing social solidarity and, consequently, people invoke them less

often. Further, in both *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912 (1995)) and in his essay “Individualism and the Intellectuals,” Durkheim argues that societies always hold certain phenomena as “sacred,” as opposed to “profane” and that, in modern, industrialized society, with its organic bonds between individuals, the individual, rather than the group, is the most sacred phenomenon (Calhoun and Gerteis 2007).

In 1898, a Jewish officer in the French military, Albert Dreyfus, stood convicted of treason for selling military secrets but newer evidence had proven his innocence. The French military, however, would not release Dreyfus, instead adding new charges and more time to his sentence. Durkheim wrote “Individualism and the Intellectuals” in response to the resulting controversy, which saw many accusing all intellectuals who supported Dreyfus with trying to sow individualism and anarchy. In it, he argued that rather than individualism leading to anarchy, individualism was the founding moral sentiment of modern, industrialized society (Calhoun and Gerteis 2007). An individual’s rights, Durkheim argued, had become “sacred in the ritual sense of the word” and “whoever makes an attempt on a man’s life, a man’s liberty, on a man’s honour, inspires in us a feeling of horror analogous in every way to that which the believer experiences when he sees his idol profaned” (Durkheim 1898 (1973); 46).

Utilizing Durkheim’s distinction between organic and mechanical solidarity then, and the changes in what people take as “sacred,” we can perhaps better understand the shift in the moral evaluation of religion. Rather than being a key basis for the common identity and repressive sanctions necessary for the cooperative success of the group, religion becomes in organically solid societies an institution seeking to impose limits and penalties on the sacred individual, whose contribution to the group is occupational and

who receives in return a degree of autonomy and individual rights. Religious beliefs and rules, in this new environment, offend the sacred rather than express it.

Like Durkheim and other interpreters of social history, Charles Taylor holds that the change in moral sentiments in the West has resulted from the change in social conditions. In Taylor's terms, what has occurred is that new social conditions have given rise to a new "moral order" and "social imaginary," that is, ideas, in some cases explicit and in some cases implicit, about what makes one a proper member of the society and what the society is "about" (2004).

For Taylor, however, the shift to the modern social imaginary, which he characterizes as a "system of mutual benefit" involving individuals with both rights and mutual obligations to support and improve the system, begins long before 19<sup>th</sup> century industrialization (2004; 2007). Rather, it has its origins in both the common purpose of Reformist Christianity and European governments in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, to transform populations into both good Christians and good citizens for the benefit of the country, and the writings of John Locke and Hugo Grotius, who, in the wake of the destructive wars of religion in Europe, sought to establish a vision of society as a group of rational social agents working together in a system that would help each one attain a degree of autonomy and happiness. According to Locke, governments became legitimate not according to divine mandate, but by whether or not they established a system benefiting their citizens (Taylor 2004; 2007).

Taylor argues that for Grotius, Locke, and many later Western thinkers, the method by which the system of mutual benefit was to be improved was human reason, considered to be given by God but which did not depend on God for its continued

operation. Thus the image of society held by most individuals was that of a system of mutual benefit involving rational social agents using their rational abilities to improve their own and others conditions through their occupations. The moral yardstick for judging religious beliefs and behaviours, then, gradually became how such beliefs and behaviours helped or hindered the system of mutual benefit of individuals pursuing their own self-interest and happiness through reason.

Utilizing Taylor's discussion of the origins of the modern social imaginary, we can further understand the moral rejection of many traditional forms of Christianity, and religion in general, that swept Europe from the 18<sup>th</sup> century forward. Most forms of traditional religion laud mystery and paradox rather than reason, which is the method by which mankind is to improve the system of mutual benefit. Most forms are authoritarian in general and concerned specifically with the denial of personal pleasure in particular and therefore violate principles of the freedom of the individual to pursue their own happiness. All forms present problematic theodicies in which current suffering is not eliminated through the application of reason within a system of mutual benefit but in some uncertain future state. And finally, many forms of Christianity seek political authority over the behaviour of individuals and, therefore, threaten the secular political authorities which are working to further the system of mutual benefit (Taylor 2007, 305).

Whether a move from mechanical to organic solidarity, from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft*, or from a social imaginary of a community of saints or a righteous kingdom to a system of mutual benefit, the changes in moral judgment are stark. From judging religious figures and clerics as messengers and representatives of divine authority on earth to judging them as oppressors of individual liberty and from engaging in public cat-

burning as a sport in 16<sup>th</sup> century Paris (Davies 1998) to passing animal cruelty laws and public service projects in the “Age of Pain” (Charles Pierce quoted in Turner 1985, 206),

Westerns:

“...learned the doctrine that evil means pain, and the revolt against pain in all its forms has grown more and more marked. From societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals up to socialism, we express in numberless ways the notion that suffering is a wrong which can be and ought to be prevented. (Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. 1885, quoted in Turner 1985, 206)

### The Effects of Evolution

While social scientists and historians have sought to link changing moral sentiments to changing socio-cultural conditions, evolutionary biologists and psychologists have documented and attempted to explain commonalities of normative judgment. They have found evidence of a common moral sense or “grammar” (Hauser 2006) beneath the surface variation of differing moral sentiments and have investigated how natural selection may have worked to give rise to the cognitive underpinnings of such commonalities.

The majority of the work on the origins of morality in the human species in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has not specifically been concerned with the origins of moral sentiment and judgment, but rather with what researchers considered moral behaviour, altruism, or cooperation. This can be explained, in part, by the ascendance of the gene-centred theory of evolution in the 1960’s with the work of W.D. Hamilton (1963, 1964) and George Williams (1966) and the attempt to explain how apparently altruistic behaviour could be a stable evolutionary strategy for organisms to pursue, given

the fact that benefiting others at the expense of oneself should end up allowing others to have higher genetic fitness and, consequently, kill off the tendency to be selfless.

Evolutionary biologists have attempted to answer this riddle by arguing for the existence and evolutionary logic of several behavioural patterns, including kin selection (Hamilton 1963, 1964), reciprocal altruism (Trivers 1971, 1985), and indirect reciprocity (Alexander 1987). W.D. Hamilton argued in the 1960's, for instance, that genes that help cause an individual to behave in ways that provide larger benefits for that individual's genetic relatives than the costs of such behaviour to the individual should increase in a population, with the result of many individuals showing altruistic behaviour toward close kin.<sup>83</sup> Robert Trivers argued in the 1970's that apparently altruistic behaviour toward non-kin could evolve within a system in which such acts would later be reciprocated to the original altruist and non-reciprocators would be denied further acts of altruism by the original altruist. Richard Alexander, in an effort to understand human cooperation and what he called "moral systems," argued in the 1980's that human cooperation and moral systems were the result of "indirect reciprocity," a behavioural strategy in which individuals can select cooperators and altruists as exchange partners and ostracize known non-cooperators based on the information provided by gossip and reputation.

While the main purpose of these theories is to explain altruistic and cooperative behaviour, they also include explanations for the rise of normative sentiments, that is, intuitive judgments about a behaviour's status as right or wrong, as these sentiments provide the proximate mechanisms by which the evolutionary

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<sup>83</sup> It should be noted that the calculation of the costs of an altruistic act and the potential benefits to the kin recipient are not consciously calculated in the mind of the individual, as anthropologist Marshall Sahlins believed when he criticized the theory of kin selection based on ethnographic evidence showing that most indigenous societies around the world do not use fractions and are, therefore, unable to compare such costs and benefits in the way required by Hamilton's rule (Sahlins 1977).

advantageous behaviours are performed. Kin selection, for instance, helps give rise to the intuitive view that compassion towards kin in need is a proper course of action and that the harming of one's close kin is morally wrong, while the systems of direct and indirect reciprocity are said to give rise to "moralistic aggression" and anger towards non-reciprocators and non-cooperators and give rise to guilt and shame towards oneself in response to one's own non-cooperative behaviour (Frank 1988, Alexander 1987, Trivers 1971).<sup>84</sup>

Such moral sentiments and behaviours are said to have emerged because they benefit particular genes within their individual carriers in competition with the other genes existing within individuals in the same population. More recently, a number of biological anthropologists and psychologists have argued that, in addition to such intragroup competition, another set of moral sentiments and behavioural dispositions have arisen in response to the conditions created by competing, symbolically defined groups, or, in other words, cultures (Brewer and Caporael 2006; Henrich 2004; Richerson and Boyd 2005; Wilson 2002). Under this cultural group selection account, which is thought by its proponents to not suffer the same shortcomings as theories of genetic group selection,<sup>85</sup> a set of "tribal social instincts" (Richerson and Boyd 2005) evolves in order to allow individuals to take advantage of the benefits of living in strongly

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<sup>84</sup> Dennis Krebs, in his review of the literature on the evolution of morality, points out that kin selection on its own may not be enough to result in such caring sentiments towards offspring and other kin but that sexual selection may also have been involved, as individuals preferentially select mates who display caring behaviour towards their own kin in order to better assure better care for that individual's offspring (2005).

<sup>85</sup> Accounts of genetic group selection, which argue that genes resulting in individuals behaving in ways detrimental to their own genetic fitness but beneficial to the group as a whole, face the problem of migration. Migration introduces genes encouraging free-riding into the population that outcompete the genes encouraging the group-beneficial behaviours. In symbolically defined cultural groups, however, the inherited variation is cultural and migrants are assimilated to group norms through the mechanisms of punishment and conformity, allowing sufficiently stable between group variation for the purposes of selection (Price 1970; Richerson and Boyd 2005).

cooperative, symbolically marked groups. Examples of these tribal social instincts include a psychology that “expects” social life to contain moral norms and is prepared to learn and internalize them, that expects the social world to be divided into symbolically marked groups, and that includes the emotions of shame, guilt, and moralistic aggression against norm-violating ingroup members and discrimination against outgroup members (Richerson and Boyd 2005).

### The Construction of Moral Sentiments

Taking into account both the literatures of social anthropology and history as well as those of evolutionary anthropology and psychology leaves us in a situation in which we have evidence of both significant variability in moral sentiments, cross-culturally and chronologically, as well as significant uniformity, as represented by the universality of kin favouritism, moralistic aggression towards non-cooperators, and commitments to symbolically marked ingroups. It seems clear that both evolved cognitive mechanisms and socio-cultural conditions must be contributing in the construction of moral sentiments. The critical questions, of course, are how they contribute to such sentiments and, more specifically for the purposes of this thesis, how they contribute to an account of the development of the strong atheist moral condemnation of religious belief and behaviour.

A promising answer to the former question, which in turn implies a promising answer to the latter, is provided in the recent work of social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, who argues that we can better understand variability in moral sentiments by coming to understand how different societies build culturally-specific virtues out of the raw material

provided by evolved moral intuitions. For Haidt, societies are not free to create and sustain all possible normative judgments. Rather, human beings possess a set of universal moral foundations, intuitive systems that constrain the range of actual normative sentiments we find. The specific, culturally relative moral sentiments that anthropologists, historians, and other scholars discuss, such as those in the West prior to the Reformation and industrialization and those after these developments, are not simply the creations of social structures and cultural traditions but joint constructions of these structures and traditions and the set of universal moral intuitions in the minds of the individuals living within these structures and with those traditions. Explicit norms that have no foundation in the moral intuitions, according to Haidt and his colleagues, will not survive as moral norms.<sup>86</sup>

Haidt and his collaborators (Haidt and Joseph 2004, 2008; Haidt and Graham 2007; Haidt and Kesebir 2009) agree with the evolutionary anthropologists and psychologists mentioned above that natural selection has equipped human beings with an innate set of moral intuitions and that these intuitions include those encouraging kin and reciprocal altruism.<sup>87</sup> Further, they cite evidence provided by evolutionary psychologists and anthropologists for the existence of an innate set of moral intuitions supporting ingroup loyalty (Kurzban, Tooby, and Cosmides 2001; Richerson and Boyd 2005), evidence from primatologists and comparative psychologists for the existence of an innate set of intuitions supporting deference to authority and the negotiation of hierarchy

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<sup>86</sup> Such a selectionist account of morality bears a striking resemblance to Dan Sperber's epidemiological approach to culture, as reviewed above. This is not accidental, as Haidt and Joseph specifically discuss their attraction to Sperber's framework (Haidt and Joseph 2008).

<sup>87</sup> Haidt is well aware of the problems surrounding use of the word "innate" (Elman et al. 1996) and is quite precise in his usage of the term, utilizing the definition of Gary Marcus (2004): "organized in advance of experience." For Haidt and his colleagues, "the genes create the first drafts of our brains, but experience in our families and cultures then edits those drafts to produce unique individuals and divergent cultures" (Haidt and Graham 2007).

(DeWall 1982; Boehm 1999), and evidence from psychologists and anthropologists for the existence of the universal emotion of disgust in response to potential contagions (Rozin et al 2000).

From this body of evidence, as well as previous work by Shweder et al. (1997) that utilized cluster analysis of interview data from residents of the city of Bhubaneswar, India to argue for the existence of three “ethics” of moral discourse, *autonomy, community, and divinity*, Haidt and his colleagues argue for the existence of five foundational domains of moral intuitions.<sup>88</sup> They label these five foundations 1) harm/care, 2) fairness/reciprocity, 3) ingroup/loyalty, 4) authority/respect, and 5) purity/sanctity (Haidt and Joseph 2008). Each of these foundations is said to result from particular adaptive challenges, have certain adaptive and actual triggers (what Sperber has labelled proper and actual domains),<sup>89</sup> and characteristic emotions. The harm/care foundation, for example, solves the adaptive challenge of protecting and caring for young, vulnerable, and injured kin, has as its proper trigger the presence or prospect of

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<sup>88</sup> Moral intuition is defined by Haidt and colleagues as “the sudden appearance in consciousness, or at the fringe of consciousness, of an evaluative feeling (like-dislike, good-bad) about the character or actions of a person, without any conscious awareness of having gone through steps of search, weighing evidence, or inferring a conclusion” (Haidt and Bjorklund 2008, 188). By arguing that moral thought is primarily a matter of intuition over reasoning, Haidt and colleagues are joining a longstanding philosophical and psychological debate, as David Hume argued for the emotional nature of morality while Immanuel Kant argued for its rational nature and, more recently, psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg argued for a six-stage account of moral development based on the growth of abstract reasoning ability (1969). The evidence in favor of the view that moral judgments are primarily, though not exclusively, a matter of intuition, however, is quite strong. Haidt and Kesebir (2009) review evidence from numerous research programs pointing to the critical role of intuition and emotion in moral judgment, from the existence of rapid judgments of trustworthiness (Todorov et al 2005) to the fact that both moral decisions in general and in economic games depend on brain regions devoted to emotion (Damasio 1994; Sanfey et al. 2003) to the fact that 6-10 month old infants preferentially reach for helping rather than hampering figures (Hamlin, Wynn, and Bloom 2007) to the fact that experimentally inducing feelings of disgust causes participants to judge norm violators more harshly (Wheatley and Haidt 2005) to the existence of “moral dumbfounding,” a situation arising when an individual immediately judges an act to be morally wrong but cannot formulate a rational reason why (Haidt and Hirsh 2001).

<sup>89</sup> Sperber (1994) refers to the set of objects that a cognitive module was “designed” to detect as the *proper domain* for that module. He contrasts the proper domain with the *actual domain*, which is the set of all objects that in fact trigger the module.

young, vulnerable, or injured kin, has a much wider set of actual triggers (including young animals of a variety of species and even cartoon characters), and produces the characteristic emotional response of compassion. Similarly, the ingroup/loyalty foundation solves the adaptive challenge of reaping the benefits of group cooperation, has as its proper triggers threats and challenges to the group but a larger set of actual triggers including loyalty to particular sports teams, and produces the characteristic emotional responses of group pride, belongingness, and rage against traitors (Haidt and Joseph 2008).<sup>90</sup>

Haidt and colleagues do not argue, however, that such universal moral intuitions are all there is to the full-fledged moral sentiments we find in the minds of actual people. They are not completed “drafts” of our moral sentiments. Rather, they provide intuitive foundations,” organized in advance of experience,” that social norms can tap into in order to gain acceptance and commitment. The development of complete, actual moral sentiments, they argue, involves not only the intuitions of “rightness” and “wrongness” provided by the five moral foundations, but also the acquisition of categories of action given by a particular society and language, such as lies, betrayals, and favours, and the categories of personal characteristics such as kindness and cruelty, loyalty and cowardice, and trustworthiness and dishonesty, the more positive of which are normally labelled as virtues (Haidt and Joseph 2008).

Haidt and his colleagues reference the extensive philosophical literature on virtue ethics but argue for a basic conception of virtue as “characteristics of a person that are morally praiseworthy” and express their explicit agreement with philosopher John

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<sup>90</sup> For a full chart outlining the five foundations with their respective adaptive challenges, proper and actual domains, characteristic emotions, and relevant socio-cultural virtues, see the Appendix G.

Dewey's conception of virtue as "dynamic patternings of perception, emotion, judgment, and action" (Haidt and Joseph 2008, 20). Virtues, according to Haidt, are social skills and to possess them is to have a mind constructed such that particular stimuli elicit socially appropriate emotional reactions, motivations, and behaviours. In a society that emphasizes caring for others and keeping them from harm, for example, the virtue of kindness can be defined as being sensitive to features of social interaction involving the well-being of others and having the motivation to act in such a way as to improve their well-being. Similarly, in a society that emphasizes proper hierarchy and authority, the virtue of deference can be defined as being sensitive to features of social interaction involving the social roles and ranks of those involved and having the motivation to act in such a way as to show proper respect for those ranked higher than oneself. A virtuous person, then, "is one who has the proper automatic reactions to ethically relevant events and states of affairs, for example, another person's suffering, an unfair distribution of a good, a dangerous but necessary mission" (Haidt and Joseph 2004).

According to the moral foundations theory of Haidt and his colleagues, such virtues are cultivated in the minds of individuals primarily through the use of narratives involving virtuous exemplars. Through narratives and other references to those characters or persons that a particular society holds to be emblematic of the virtues and behaviours that the society values, an individual is increasingly trained to experience moral emotions in response to particular sets of stimuli (Haidt and Joseph 2004, 2008; Haidt and Kesebir 2009). A frequently told story in one society may involve an individual protecting another member of the society from a third party because of how much the heroic individual cared for this person, thereby associating care and protection

with praiseworthiness in the minds of recipients. A frequently told story in another society may involve an individual killing another member of the society in order to appease the gods, keep the society “pure,” and allow it to prosper, thereby associating group loyalty and sanctity with praiseworthiness in the minds of recipients. Individuals in both societies have the same moral foundations, yet if these individuals receive different narratives about how such moral feelings are to be understood in relation to particular social concepts and behaviours consistently over time, they are likely to have different moral reactions to the same act, such as an individual from a society focused more exclusively on harm/care and fairness/reciprocity experiencing moral outrage at a human sacrifice in a society that focuses more on ingroup/loyalty, purity/sanctity, and authority/respect. One has acquired the virtue of being sensitive to the welfare of others and interprets such an act as a grievous moral violation, as the moral foundation of harm/care has been emphasized in his society’s narratives involving killing. The other has acquired the virtue of being sensitive to displays of commitment and personal sacrifice for the good of the society and consequently interprets such an act as a morally righteous action deserving of great praise, as the moral foundations of purity/sanctity, authority/respect, and ingroup/loyalty have been emphasized in his society’s narratives involving killing.

With this account of the construction of moral sentiments from both innate moral intuitions and socio-culturally relative virtues, we are able to better explain the historical changes in moral sentiments in the West discussed by such scholars as Durkheim and Taylor. These scholars were apt in their perception of such changes and their relation to social structures. Yet, given the amount of evidence for universal moral intuitions

provided by the evolutionary and cognitive sciences, such accounts are, at best, incomplete. Haidt's account allows us to better explain the historical process because it can do so in a way consistent with the findings of the cognitive sciences.

A large-scale change in the moral sentiments of a population over time is not merely a matter of a new "story" about morality or the social construction of new norms to fit new interests, but rather a change in the manner in which the innate moral intuitions of individuals in those populations are being engaged by narrative and praise. Haidt refers to such changes as changes in "emphasis" on the various moral foundations. The moral sentiments in the minds of most individuals in modern Western civilization are not merely the result of a shift to *gesellschaft*, then, or organic solidarity or a system of mutual benefit, but rather the result of a shift in moral emphasis toward the harm/care and the fairness/reciprocity foundations, at the expense of ingroup/loyalty, respect/authority, and purity/sanctity.

For Haidt, many of the sociologists concerned with such changes, including Tönnies and Durkheim, are correct in their identification of the social and economic changes that drove changes in moral sentiment: "Wealth, mobility, technology, education, and cultural diversity—all of these factors weaken the historical interdependence of people within a longstanding community, and free individuals to construct lives for themselves guided by their own preferences. As that happens, the relative importance of the five foundations shifts" (Haidt and Graham 2009). Haidt and his colleagues are clear in saying that the changes in moral sentiments occurred not merely because social conditions changed, but because of a joint process between those new conditions and a universal set of moral intuitions. What Haidt and his colleagues are

less clear about is how this “shift” actually occurred in historical time. How is it that such changes in socio-economic conditions caused people to emphasize some moral norms and virtues over others such that we can sensibly speak of a shift of “emphasis?”

A tentative but plausible answer can be found in the changing demands made on individuals for success and, consequently, the virtues that families, other guardians, and peers emphasize more frequently and forcefully to maturing individuals. That is, in order to succeed in a society characterized by *gesellschaft* and organic solidarity, which requires them to work alongside others from different kin groups, denominations, and ethnic identities, an individual must often limit their enthusiasm for such ingroups. Further, they must recognize the importance of reciprocity and contracts, from the receipt of their compensation for work to the contractual obligations between those engaged in business. Once business enterprises begin to make such demands on their employees, the characteristics needed for social and economic success change.

Given that close kin and other guardians wish for their children to succeed in society, an obvious prediction of kin selection theory in social species, it is highly likely that many families began to lessen the frequency and forcefulness of their narrative discourse and praise concerning strong ingroup commitment and loyalty. There would be less motivation, for example, for repeating narratives involving loyal, selfless individuals who sacrifice all personal gain to avenge an insult to a family member or a member of their religious denomination or pure individuals who avoid the “unclean” members of other religious and ethnic groups. There would be more motivation, however, to point out socially and financially successful individuals from within the family or surrounding community as virtuous exemplars.

Further, in the emerging Western societies, those individuals who have peers participating in the “system of mutual benefit” through employment and other activities, would have increased exposure to both the system itself and those individuals whose moral sentiments were changing. Thus, even if, as was likely the case, many members of older generations saw few changes in their moral sentiments, many younger individuals would still be exposed to both narrative and social examples of the system of mutual benefit.

The consequences of all this would be that, over a few generations, individuals would have grown up having received much less exposure to narratives and praise regarding the virtues of ingroup/loyalty, respect/authority, and purity/sanctity. Thus, while these individuals would all still possess the universal moral intuitions supporting such virtues, they would interpret a wider range of stimuli in terms of the moral sentiments that had been more greatly emphasized in their upbringing, those based on harm/care and fairness/reciprocity.

The above account is, of course, highly speculative. Given the paucity of data concerning how parents, guardians, and peers utilized narrative and social example in everyday discourse during the period of nationalization and industrialization in the West, it is likely to remain so. It is, however, a plausible account of how the social changes involved in the West’s transition from mechanical to organic solidarity, from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft*, and from a kingdom ordained by God to a system of mutual benefit, could work to change the moral sentiments of individuals, given that those individuals all possess the universal set of moral intuitions identified by Haidt and his colleagues.

While the construction of moral sentiment in Westerners from the 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries is a process about which data are very difficult to access, the construction of moral sentiments in Westerners today is less so. The claim of Haidt and his colleagues is that many Westerners today, especially those objecting to the moral status of more conservative and traditional religious teachings and practices, possess moral sensibilities based primarily on the moral foundations of harm/care and fairness/reciprocity, with relatively underdeveloped moral sensibilities based on ingroup loyalty, deference to authority, and sanctified purity. If this is so, we should be able to examine the moral sentiments of these individuals and find them more concerned with the harm/care and fairness/reciprocity and to examine the processes by which they obtained these sentiments were constructed and find them to involve narrative examples emphasizing the importance of virtues related to harm/care and fairness/reciprocity.

While much of the ethnographic data above concerning strong atheism's rejection of religion is relevant in supporting Haidt's claims, I also managed to collect preliminary but suggestive data, through both survey questions and open conversations, about both the moral sentiments of non-theists, including strong atheists, as well as about the processes by which they came to possess such sentiments. All of this data supports the claim that strong atheists possess moral sentiments founded primarily, if not exclusively, on the "liberal" moral foundations of harm/care and fairness/reciprocity and that the emphasis that parents and other guardians place on the differing foundations through narrative examples and moral exemplars is a significant factor in determining the moral sentiments of maturing individuals.

Within a survey for both theists and non-theists, I embedded the twenty-item version of Haidt's Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ).<sup>91</sup> The MFQ consists of two sets of questions, the first of which asks participants to rate how relevant certain concerns are when they when they decide "whether something is right or wrong," the second of which asks participants to rate the extent to which they agree or disagree with particular normative statements, and both of which utilize a six point scale. In the first set of questions, for example, participants are asked to rate such items as "whether or not someone suffered emotionally" and "whether or not someone cared for someone weak or vulnerable" in terms of how relevant they are to their moral decision making. Their answers suggest the importance of the harm/care foundation in their moral thinking. Similarly, the items "whether or not someone's actions showed love for his or her country" and "whether or not someone did something to betray his or her group" are included in order to establish the importance of the ingroup/loyalty foundation in the participants' moral sentiments. In the second set of questions, participants were asked to rate their agreement or disagreement with items such as "Justice is the most important requirement for a society" to establish the importance of the fairness/reciprocity foundation and "People should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong" to establish the importance of the ingroup/loyalty foundation.<sup>92</sup>

Haidt and his colleagues follow the terminology of American political discourse in labelling an individuals moral sentiments as more "progressive" or more "conservative," with progressive morality being more exclusively concerned with

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<sup>91</sup> Haidt also offers a thirty item version, which possesses a higher measure of scale reliability, but given the fact that this questionnaire was to be embedded within a much larger questionnaire for theists and non-theists, I chose the twenty item scale in order to lessen demand on participants.

<sup>92</sup> The entire Moral Foundations Questionnaire can be found in Appendix H.

harm/care and fairness/reciprocity at the expense of the “conservative” foundations of ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity and conservative morality showing a relatively equal emphasis on all five foundations (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009). Consequently, each individual participant receives a “progressivism” score equalling the average rating of all the items pertaining to harm/care and fairness/reciprocity minus the average rating of all the items pertaining to ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity. Individuals who rate progressive moral items as more relevant get positive scores while individuals who rate conservative moral items as more relevant get negative scores. Possible scores range from -6 to 6, though these extremes are highly unlikely (Haidt and Graham 2007).

For the 661 non-theists who took the MFQ, the average progressivism score was 1.94 (SD=.94), nearly identical to the average progressivism score of individuals who rated themselves as “extremely liberal” in a large online survey conducted by Haidt and Graham (2007). Of the 774 participants, 71.8% had scores over 1.00, 50.9% had scores over 2.00, and 14.9% had scores over 3.00. Tellingly, only 1.9%, or 15 individual non-theists had negative progressivism scores.

Even with a much smaller sample of theists taking the MFQ (N=25), the difference between theists and non-theists in progressivism scores is statistically significant and meaningful, with theists having an average progressivism score of 1.00 (SD=1.11), ( $t=4.91$ ,  $df=684$ ,  $p<.001$ , two-tailed).

Many of the comments from non-theists after completing the MFQ, while expressing concern over the abstract nature of the questions, revealed more explicit statements of their moral sentiments and showed clearly their basis in harm/care and

fairness/reciprocity. A 23 year old male from the UK who identifies as atheist, non-theist, and humanist depending on context, for example, writes that,

“These questions are quite abstract, and quite difficult to answer using the system above. So to clarify, I put the individual first in all considerations, except those conditions wherein the desires of an individual or minority actually (directly) impinge on that of the majority. I do NOT see tradition as any form of authority that 'has to' or indeed 'should be' adhered to. I also count patriotism amongst this fallacy. I am no patriot, I would not want to be and I would not expect anyone's loyalty on the basis of nationality or tradition. True loyalty comes from friendship which is something far more intimate than concepts of large groups.”

Similarly, a 46 year old female non-theist from the United States wrote that, “To me, the test of ‘right or wrong’ is basically whether or not someone (or something) else suffered in some way- physically, mentally, or emotionally. Any other considerations are secondary.”

All of the data presented above, both quantitative and qualitative, supports the claims of Haidt and his colleagues regarding the moral foundations of those identifying themselves as “liberal,” or “progressive,” and those who have moral objections to traditional (i.e. conservative) religious beliefs, which place a great deal of emphasis on remaining loyal to the religious group, respecting the authority of supernatural agents and their human representatives, and keeping both the individual and the group sanctified and pure. The moral sentiments of nearly all non-theists I surveyed, spoke with, and whose opinions I read in blogs and books, are firmly based on harm/care and fairness/reciprocity, with minimal reliance on the foundations of ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity.

Preliminary evidence from both the online survey and open-ended conversations also supports the claim that being exposed to narratives and discourse stressing harm/care

and fairness/reciprocity is an important cause of the development of such moral sentiments. Survey questions concerning what moral values parents and guardians emphasized while non-theistic participants were growing up reveal that parents and guardians of non-theists emphasize the liberal moral foundations of harm/care and fairness/reciprocity. Moreover, open-ended survey comments, as well as open-ended conversations from my fieldwork reveal the importance of narrative example in this construction of moral sentiment.

Haidt and his colleagues argue that actual moral sentiments are the joint creation of innate, universal moral intuitions and the narratives and examples communicated to an individual that tap into these intuitions and channel them into socio-culturally specific virtues, such as kindness or deference. If this is indeed the case, we should find that those individuals with moral sentiments more firmly based on the foundations of harm/care and fairness/reciprocity had these foundations emphasized to a greater extent during their upbringing by parents or other guardians.<sup>93</sup>

In order to address this issue, I formulated general preliminary questions in the latter stages of my research and asked participants to rate the extent to which their parents emphasized a) “the importance of compassion and empathy,” b) the importance of fairness and justice for all people (regardless of race, class, and religion) c) “encourage you to be patriotic about your country,” d) “the importance of authority,” and e) “that the sexual (e.g. homosexuality) or dietary (e.g. killing and eating sheep in one's back garden) practices of others were ‘disgusting.’” All items were ranked on a six point scale from 0

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<sup>93</sup> A more comprehensive account of the construction of any individual's moral sentiments, of course, would need to involve much more than what was emphasized to them by their parents but also take into account the nature of the parental relationship, other role models, and exposure to differing moral values through media exposure. Such an account is beyond the scope of the current investigation into non-theism but remains as a needed area of interdisciplinary research.

(To no extent at all) to 6 (To a great extent) and included space for comments on the question or specific instances that participants could recall when such values were emphasized by their parents or guardians.

As expected, non-theists, with their moral sentiments based mostly on the foundations of harm/care and fairness/reciprocity, received greater emphasis on the liberal moral foundations (items 1-2) than the conservative moral foundations (items 3-5), as revealed by a paired t-test: (Liberal foundations Mean= 3.91, SD=1.52; Conservative foundations Mean=2.37, SD=1.23;  $t(484)=16.12$ ,  $p<.001$ ).<sup>94</sup> Judging from the comments left after the question regarding the extent to which participants' parents emphasized the importance of authority, this difference may actually be more pronounced, as many participants commented that they wished to distinguish between their parents' emphasis on their own authority in the household and larger "systems" of authority such as the state, a religion, or a company and that the former was emphasized without the latter. Others revealed that though they could say honestly that authority was "emphasized" to a certain extent, it was not authority itself that was being emphasized but the values this authority upheld: "My parents recognized the importance of authority, but only in so far as it was underpinned by principles of justice, fairness and respect." Such sentiments could also be found in comments on the item concerning patriotism, as many non-theists commented that such patriotism was not necessarily unconditional but rather the result of a country's upholding of the values of individual liberty and justice. It is possible then, that the difference in emphasis between the liberal and conservative moral foundations during the upbringing of non-theists is even more pronounced than indicated in the above statistic.

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<sup>94</sup> For a graphical representation of this data, please refer to Appendix I.

In addition to this significant difference between liberal and conservative moral emphasis, a small but significant correlation exists between the extent to which an individual's parents emphasized liberal moral foundations and their current progressivism scores, suggesting that such emphasizing by parents and guardians plays a role in the determination of one's moral sentiments ( $r=.134$ ,  $N=496$ ,  $p=.003$ , two-tailed).

Haidt and colleagues argue that the primary way in which societies construct particular virtues, such as kindness, from innate moral intuitions, such as those of the harm/care foundation, is narrative rather than argument. The parables of Jesus and the *hadith* of Mohammed, they argue, seem much more prevalent in moral instruction and argument in everyday discourse than abstract principles (Haidt and Joseph 2007). And indeed, both the answers provided by participants of the online survey in the post-item optional comments and the open-ended conversations I had with both theists and non-theists the US, UK, and Denmark reveal that the primary method of moral instruction is narrative rather than argument. These narratives do not normally take the form of traditional stories, such as the parables of Jesus, however. Instead, the most common moral narratives are created out of past or ongoing events, which many parents place within a wider narrative context of divine judgment, Marxist revolution, or the institution of ideal social conditions.

A 41 year old female Bright from Spain, for instance, responded after the question on the emphasis on authority that her parents frequently discussed their negative experiences under the Franco regime. This person wrote that her parents "made it clear" that this type of authority was illegitimate and was rightly opposed by many. Implicit in this report is a narrative of the redemption of Spain, from the unjust authoritarian rule of

Franco to a more just democracy. From such exposure, she writes, “I learned to be critical about authority.”

A young atheist from Canada, however, wrote in response to the question regarding patriotic loyalty to his country that the only patriotic instruction he remembered receiving was discussion among his parents concerning what was wrong with the United States, including its lack of universal health care, tolerance of poverty, and its desire to impose its national interest around the globe at the expense of the welfare of innocent people. His sense of patriotism, then, came from the fact that Canada is not like America in these respects. The moral instruction present in these comparisons is clear in that the evaluation of the United States is based on the foundation of harm/care and fairness/reciprocity; it is wrong to not provide care to those who need it or to impose one’s will on others simply because one is powerful enough to do so.

In addition to such responses to items on the survey, I spoke with several individuals about the formation of their sense of morality by their parents. Nearly all brought up the role of media, such as newspapers and television news broadcasts, in triggering such instruction; relatively few, by contrast, mentioned specific bodies of moral teaching such as the parables of Jesus or the *hadith* of Mohammed. A twenty-five year old male theist from the United States, for example, discussed his religious upbringing and how his mother frequently would attempt to instruct him through comments on stories in the newspaper. “She would look at a story about something like casinos getting built somewhere in the state and would just launch into this speech on how these sinners would be brought low before God someday. That Jesus was coming back and he would judge those that gambled, boozed, and defiled themselves.” Such a

speech embeds a morality of sanctified purity and respect for authority within a narrative framework from the Christian tradition regarding the future judgment of individuals for their sins.

Similarly, a middle-aged self-identifying “strong atheist” from the United Kingdom recalled how her older sister, an avid Marxist, frequently commented on news stories in the 1980’s about the rise of “corporate Capitalist greed around the world.” “She would talk about how women used to be unoppressed and people were all pretty much equal back before private property and religion allowed men to take over everything and how the world we live in now is just the result of that same process run-amok... Every once in a while she would talk about what it would be like after true Communism was instituted everywhere and people would all be treated fairly and women would no longer be oppressed by men and religious dogma.” Such discourse embeds a morality of harm/care and fairness/reciprocity within a narrative framework from the Marxist tradition regarding the origins of inequality and the coming of a more just, sexually equal, and irreligious society when Capitalism gives way to Communism.

The above evidence, though provisional, supports the account of Haidt and colleagues. It appears that, though all human beings share a set of moral intuitions as a result of their common evolutionary heritage, the use of narrative and social example can work to develop certain of these intuitions into particular moral sentiments and virtues. Such an account, combined with the historical and social analyses of figures such as Durkheim and Taylor, yields a more comprehensive account of the production of moral sentiments in opposition to many forms of religious belief and practice, both historically and individually. As Western society came to possess the characteristics of organic

solidarity, *gesellschaft*, and a system of mutual benefit, the virtues associated with ingroup loyalty, deference to authority, and sanctified purity became less and less associated with social and economic success. Consequently, those virtues associated with the foundations of harm/care and fairness/reciprocity became to be seen as most, if not all, of morality, a process labelled by Haidt and others as “the great narrowing” (Haidt and Kesebir 2009). Once these moral sentiments are in place, many individuals view traditional religious doctrines, such as substitutionary atonement and eternal punishment as immoral in that they violate moral principles of justice, empathy, and individual liberty. These are precisely the charges laid at the feet of religions and the religious by strong atheists, who possess both moral sentiments based firmly on harm/care and fairness/reciprocity as well as a sense of virtue regarding limiting one’s beliefs to whatever can be established empirically through the sciences and rationally through the proper use of one’s own mind.

The answer, then, to the question of how the moral condemnation of religion associated with strong atheism comes about, then, is that the social arrangements of the modern West encouraged a shift in emphasis away from the more conservative intuitive moral foundations while keeping and even strengthening the use of the more liberal intuitive moral foundations in the construction of social virtues and moral sentiments. With these sentiments in place, many individuals, both religious and non-religious, rejected as immoral many of the doctrines and practices of Christianity in the West. Many individuals sought to alter the religious doctrines and practices in order to bring them more in line with the moral foundations of harm/care and fairness/reciprocity. Many others embraced the Victorian virtue of “manliness” of belief, originally

propagated from within the Christian tradition itself in the form of “masculine Christianity.” Such individuals, who saw traditional religious beliefs and practices as offensive to their sense of compassion and justice as well as a type of mental weakness that one must steel oneself against, became strong atheists. They do not merely lack the belief in the existence of supernatural agency; they possess moral sentiments holding such beliefs to be harmful to both individuals and societies.

## Chapter 8. Strong Atheism: Varying Intensity

The moral rejection of religious beliefs and practices and the drive to keep such things away from government and to make others think more “rationally” was, for quite some time in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, a matter of individuals expressing such views, sometimes only to themselves in private diaries. The authorities in many countries at the time still viewed atheism and anti-clericalism as politically dangerous. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century forward however, individuals with such views began to organize themselves into a variety of civil groups, some concerned primarily with keeping governments secular, others concerned primarily with spreading rational thought, others still concerned primarily with providing supportive communities for those seeking to live “moral lives” without traditional religious belief. All of these forms of “irreligion,” to use the term of sociologist Colin Campbell (1971), found traditional religion to be an immoral institution and sought to, in one way or another, combat it through their collective efforts.<sup>95</sup>

Through an examination of the history and present status of such groups internationally, two points become clear. First, while it is true that there exist several different types of groups with both unique and overlapping objectives, a key division can be made between those groups seeking to abolish religion from the public sphere, and from the minds of human minds in general, which Campbell labels as “abolitionist” groups, and those groups seeking to form a non-theistic alternative to religious communities, which Campbell labels as “substitutionalist” groups (1971). Second, both the histories of such groups within individual countries, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to today, as

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<sup>95</sup> Campbell defines irreligion as “those beliefs and actions which are expressive of attitudes of hostility or indifference toward the prevailing religion, together with indications of the rejection of its demands” (1971, 21).

well as international comparisons in the presence and strength of such groups reveals that strong atheist activity, which includes joining organizations, attending meetings, writing letters, articles and books, and expressing strongly atheistic views, is significantly and dramatically affected by the threats posed to the “system of mutual benefit” and “individual liberty” by religious people in a given time and place. The more religious individuals and groups in the West attempt to influence government policy according to their religious beliefs, the more strong atheist activity we see in response.

### From Individuals to Movements

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, strong atheism was found in the West in the writings of individuals, not in the founding documents of organizations. The French Catholic priest Jean Meslier (1664-1729) was one of the first strong atheists in modern Western history, though his *Testament* was only found after his death. In it, Meslier argued against the existence of both the Christian God and the Deist God and also expressed his hatred of religious morality and organized religion itself, as is clear from his statement (a version of which was also attributed to Denis Diderot), that mankind would not escape its ills until “the last king has been strangled in the entrails of the last priest” (quoted in Thrower 2000, 100). The French philosopher Denis Diderot (1713-1784), was less strongly atheistic than Meslier, as he vacillated between deism and atheism in his writings. This was enough, however, to merit his imprisonment by the French authorities in 1749 (Adams 2007).

The first publicly outspoken strong atheist in the modern West, however, who did not wait until his death to proclaim his atheism or vacillate between deism and atheism

was Baron D'Holbach (1723-1789). In his writings, D'Holbach indicts religion for providing a faulty basis for morality, for being unscientific, and for giving support to a corrupt social order (Campbell 1971).

It was D'Holbach's third charge against religion, that it provides support for a corrupt social order, that would prove key in bringing strong atheism to the masses. And while many individuals may have had a role to play in this process of popularization, the key figures were the British revolutionary Thomas Paine (1737-1809) and the Welsh social reformer Robert Owen (1771-1858).

Paine, a Deist and participant in both the American and French Revolutions, continually attacked Christianity as corrupt and serving the interests of the establishment in Europe. It was as a result of Paine's writings, such as *The Age of Reason* (1794), with their strong anti-clerical, anti-theological, and anti-Christian views, that early attempts at establishing a strong atheist movement in the West were conducted (Campbell 1971). British political agitator Richard Carlile (1790-1843), for instance, established a joint venture with former Reverend Robert Taylor (1784-1844) called the "Infidel Home Missionary Tour," publishing Paine's writings in cheap formats for the poor, and touring the country spreading the "infidel" tradition (Flynn 2007; Campbell 1971). Both were arrested for their efforts, and though they did not succeed in establishing a large scale movement themselves, their public martyrdom for their beliefs raised the profile of strongly anti-religious views and causes in England.

For the first anti-religious organization to succeed, however, the influence of Robert Owen was required. Owen promoted socialism in both Great Britain and the United States, even setting up a commune at New Harmony, Indiana in 1826 in an effort

to combat what he saw as the corrupt social order provided by religion and capitalism. While the Owenite cause ultimately failed, as did the experiment at New Harmony, the organizational elements of Owenism changed into a Secularist movement through the efforts of George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906), the coiner of the word “secular” (Campbell 1971).

As further evidence of the fact that it was the notion that religious beliefs upheld a corrupt and oppressive social order that made strong atheism a more widespread view, the early secularist and atheist movements in both the United States and the United Kingdom drew members heavily from the working classes, who frequently saw the ties between the economic and religious establishments and protested the latter as a result of their protesting of the former. This is not to say that the poor masses huddled in the alleys of London with the onset of industrialization were all or even primarily secularists and strong atheists. It is, however, to say that, as evidenced by reports from clergyman such as Charles Davies in 1870’s London, secular and infidel society meetings were full of “great bearded fellows with the signs of labour on their horny hands,” such that Davies often wondered how the organizers got anyone to pay for the meetings and lectures (quoted in Campbell 1971, 51-52).

Once the working classes became involved with the causes of secularism and atheism, the movements grew in both England and the United States (Campbell 1971; Whitehead and Muhrer 1992). As will be made clear below, these groups took on a variety of forms and took hold in several countries, but all can be categorized as either abolitionist or substitutionalist and the history and contemporary patterns of these groups reveal that strong atheist activity is in a significant sense a product of religion attempting

to assert itself in public life, potentially upsetting the order of mutual benefit and individual liberty, which many hold as the “normative order” of modern society. That is, when the normative order of a secular state is threatened, more non-theistic, non-religious individuals embrace strong atheism.

### Organized Non-theism: History

Two broad categories of organized irreligion have existed since the beginnings of such groups in 19<sup>th</sup> century England, abolitionist groups, composed of strong atheists and secularists, and substitutionalist groups, composed of those seeking a non-theistic alternative to religious communities. Both categories, however, have contained and continue to contain elements of strong atheism, if only in the words of their individual members.

Abolitionist groups, normally labelling themselves as infidel or secularist societies, campaigned for secular government and the promotion of reason, as well as a non-theistic morality, in both England and the United States. In England, George Jacob Holyoake branched out from the Owenite movement to attack religion specifically and was persecuted by the English authorities. After the brief existence of an Anti-Persecution Union for those expressing anti-religious sentiments, the Owenite movement faded away and, in 1851, Holyoake decided to form the Central Secular Society. The stated aims of this society were to show that morals are independent of Christianity, to encourage men to “trust Reason, and to trust nothing that Reason does not establish,” to promote the “fullest liberty of thought for individuals,” to argue that “open discussion of opinion is the best guarantee of truth,” and that the “business of intelligence is to rectify

inequality” (quoted in Campbell 1971, 48-49). Between 1851 and 1861, over sixty secularist groups appeared around England.

The British atheist activist and politician Charles Bradlaugh formed the National Secular Society in 1866, taking a more hard-line approach to organizational activism than Holyoake in that he intentionally provoked the authorities in order to both widely publicize the secularist cause and to have himself and others in the movement serve as martyrs against what the public would see as an oppressive government (Campbell 1971). He further stressed, in opposition to Holyoake, that religious reform was impossible and that the supernatural beliefs themselves must be removed from society. The strategy was successful, as Bradlaugh took over the leadership of the secularist cause from Holyoake and greatly expanded the base of support for secularism and atheism in England.

In the United States, under the freedom of the press provided by the Constitution, “infidel” pamphlets were common from the 1820’s, with many local infidel societies working to publish them in order to combat Christianity and superstition amongst working class Americans. Most of these small societies were in the northeastern United States, though pamphlets and letters to the editor were also published throughout the frontier, including Missouri, where a large number of German immigrants, forced to leave Germany because of “anti-monarchic” activities, established several rationalist periodicals (Whitehead and Merle 1992).

No large, national organizations, such as the Central Secular Society or the National Secular Society, however, existed in the United States for several decades. It was not until the American Secular Union rose from the ashes of the failed National Liberal League in 1885 that a national organization existed, and even the American

Secular Union was specifically devoted to issues of secularism rather than a promotion of rationalism or atheism, as it wished to distance itself from more hard-line “radicals” (Cooke 2007). The American Secular Union saw growth under the leadership of Robert Ingersoll and also some political success, as it forced the Catholic Church in Chicago, Illinois to repay \$60,000 in public money in 1896.

Several national organizations devoted to secularism and strong atheism arose in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The American Association for the Advancement of Atheism, for example, was formed in 1925 with the explicit goals of taxing churches, ending paid chaplaincy, removing “In God We Trust” as the motto of the United States, and ending religious oaths in court. It lacked both the resources and support, however, to be successful and has slowly diminished throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Flynn 2007).

In the wake of noted atheist Madalyn Murray O’Hair’s lawsuit against the Baltimore school system, which successfully removed school-sponsored prayer and bible reading from American schools, O’Hair started what has been one of the most successful strong atheist organizations, American Atheists, in 1963 (Le Beau 2003). The organization has since worked for separation of state and church, the civil rights of atheists, and the promotion of reason and atheism. Further, in 1976, Annie Laurie Gaylor and her mother Anne Nicole Gaylor founded the Freedom From Religion Foundation, which has since promoted separation of church and state and also the promotion of “freethought” through its monthly newspaper, *Freethought Today*.

Organized atheism has been, by comparison, largely absent in Scandinavia, with national level organizations of atheists, secularists, and humanists only forming in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. In Denmark, the *Humanistisk Forbund* (Humanist Society)

began in 1960, but has steadily lost membership and support since, despite changing its name to *Hanistisk Debat* (Humanist Debate) (Hiorth 2007). Further, the *Atiestisk Selskab* (Atheist Company) was founded in 2002 with the expressed intent to advocate the further separation of church and state in Denmark, most notably by campaigning against Christianity being taught in schools. In Sweden, the Human-Etiska Forbundet (the Human-Ethical Society) was founded in 1979 and continues to work to remove religious education from schools and to “make known the right to a concept of life without faith in gods or religion” (Hiorth 2007).

Substitutionalist groups have also had a presence in the UK, US, and Scandinavia, attacking religion with less ferocity and frequency and instead seeking to provide the benefits of religious communities without theism. The emphasis in such organizations seems to be the assertion of a more positive humanist value system than attacking religion.

One of the earliest and most intellectually famous attempts to form a non-theistic community was that of philosopher Auguste Comte (1798-1857), who created the Religion of Humanity in the 1850's. Comte saw humanity as the “great being,” and offered detailed requirements of those who would serve as clergy in this religion of humanity, with himself as the “high priest.” The movement was not embraced widely, but in England Richard Congreve (1818-1899), a tutor at Wadham College, Oxford, as well as some of his students, spread the Positivist message and formed a Positivist Society in London in 1867 (Campbell 1971). The society lasted until 1899.

England also saw the importation of Ethical Societies from the United States (discussed in more detail below). The Ethical movement came to England in 1896, had

its peak in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with over fifty societies around the country, only to see a steady decline until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when only four remained.

In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the substitutionalist cause began to dominate organized non-theism in the United Kingdom. There was a distinct shift away from rationalism and attacking religion and towards the movement of humanism. The Rationalist Press Association, which had been publishing rationalist and anti-religious materials for decades, changed its language to “humanist” and announced a policy change “from things we do not believe in, or condemn, to a positive affirmation of what we do believe in and are willing to support” (quoted in Campbell 1971, p.92). This shift in the United Kingdom is further evidenced by the current lack of national level organizations devoted to atheism and rationalism and the ubiquity of humanist societies, underneath the umbrella of the British Humanist Association (BHA), which formed out of the Rationalist Press Association and the Ethical Union in 1963. On the BHA’s website, it is written that humanism is “a naturalistic view, encompassing atheism and agnosticism as responses to theistic claims, but is an active and ethical philosophy far greater than these reactions to religion.” Moreover, in an effort to provide some of community services traditionally provided by religions, the BHA provides Humanist naming, wedding, funeral ceremonies.

In the United States, the first successful substitutionalist groups were the Ethical Societies established by Felix Adler in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Adler, the son of a rabbi, studied philosophy, including neo-Kantian idealism, in Germany. Upon his return, he preached in his New York City Temple that morality could be established

independently of God. This was deemed much too liberal by others in the Temple and Adler moved to set up the first Society for Ethical Culture in New York City in 1876. Additional societies were established in Chicago, Philadelphia, and St. Louis over the next few years (Campbell 1971).

The Ethical Societies shared the principle of establishing a morality independent of theology, a principle Adler himself expressed as “deed not creed,” as well as a commitment to philanthropy, to reform both society and self, and to participate in the moral instruction of children. Early on, the societies sought to avoid formal procedures and rituals, but both eventually came to pervade the societies. The Ethical Society of St. Louis, for example, greatly resembles a Protestant Church, with large windows, pews, a raised platform at the front of the assembly hall, Sunday School classes, children’s programs, and ushers.

Humanism flourished at the University of Chicago in the 1920’s, and the Humanist Press Association published a Humanist Manifesto in 1933 as a liberal reaction to conservative theology. Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, numerous Humanist Communities were founded around the country. Some, including the Palo Alto Humanist Community in California, offer a non-theistic alternative to religious communities, as they run weekly services, book clubs, Sunday school classes, potluck lunches, and numerous social gatherings for families. On the Palo Alto Humanist Community’s website, Humanism is described as “a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism and other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfilment and aspire to the greater good of humanity” (Humanist Community).

Substitutionalist organizations, like abolitionist ones, were slow in coming to Scandinavia. In Denmark, there was no organized humanist until the Humanistisk Forbund in 1960, and its activity and membership dropped steadily after 1975, from 700 members in 1987 to just under 100 in 2004 (Hiorth 2007). Further, only in the last few years has there been an effort by some within the organized atheist community in Denmark to provide Humanist alternatives to religious services, such as confirmations, weddings, and funerals, and this effort is not uncontroversial among Danish atheists.

The largest humanist organization in the world, however, exists in Norway. Founded in 1956, the Human-Etisk Forbund (The Human-Ethical Society), had as of 2008, over 72,000 members, a remarkable number, especially considering that the population of Norway is fewer than 5,000,000. This Norwegian organization provides Humanist weddings, confirmations, and funerals to its members and, according to its website, works to develop a “humanist life stance” and to offer members a “social and organizational framework for life stance identity and a sense of community.”<sup>96</sup>

Besides showing the existence of two general categories of organized non-theism, one abolitionist and more strongly atheistic, one substitutionalist and more positively oriented, an examination of the organizations listed above also reveals that strong atheist activity has risen and fallen according to the degree of religious involvement in government and public life.

The first fact supporting this argument is that it was in England, and not the United States, where organized atheism began. The United States Constitution had secured a separation of church and state, making any laws or policies supporting or

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<sup>96</sup> The vast difference in membership between Norway’s Humanist Group and those of Sweden and Denmark is discussed below.

reflecting particular religious viewpoints unconstitutional. Further, the United States also established freedom of speech and freedom of the press. None of these was present in England for the bulk of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, those wishing to publish “infidel” newsletters and hold occasional local meetings were perfectly within their rights to do so, though they certainly would face social consequences from their neighbours and co-workers. In England, however, there existed an established church, the Church of England and blasphemy laws were both on the books and enforced. There existed no freedom of speech or the press. Moreover, it was when individual freethinkers, such as Bradlaugh or Carlile, were jailed for their speeches or publications, that these organizations gained both notoriety and momentum (Campbell 1971). The strategy of martyrdom was frequently successful.

The second fact supporting the claim is that, when freedom of speech and freedom of the press was effectively achieved in England in the 1890’s,<sup>97</sup> the secular societies saw their membership numbers plummet and public interest wane (Campbell 1971). This lack of persecution was a significant factor in the decline of the secularist movement, as it was clear to the leadership of these organizations, such as Bradlaugh, that it was this very persecution that drove the public’s support for their cause and the numbers of individuals signing up as members. Further, organized atheism and rationalism in the United Kingdom remained relatively marginal through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When organized non-theism did succeed in the United Kingdom in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was after a switch in message and labels. The Rationalist

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<sup>97</sup> While individuals had obtained much more freedom to say and publish what they wished in England in the 1890’s, blasphemy laws were active in the United Kingdom throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and were only ended in 2008, after a lengthy campaign by such organizations as the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society.

Press Association changed its language to be more positive and the British Humanist Association put forward a message not of attacking religion, which no longer seemed relevant with much less religious presence in government affairs, but of promoting humanist values and providing humanist ceremonies.

A third fact supporting the argument is the lack of organized non-theism of any kind in the Scandinavian countries throughout the entirety of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and much of the 20<sup>th</sup>. As discussed in chapter five, holding particular religious beliefs or performing certain religious practices were not significant elements of Danish identity in the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries; solidarity was, instead, provided by a high degree of ethnic homogeneity and the secularized version of Lutheranism propagated by Grundtvig that formed the ideological basis of the Danish welfare state. With little importance and consequence associated with religious beliefs and practices, there was little cause for individuals to insert specifically religious concerns into public life and government. Consequently, there has been little need for those not holding such concerns to band together into organizations in order to combat any presence of religiosity in government and public affairs.

### Organized Non-theism: Contemporary Patterns

While it is the case that the general differences between abolitionist and substitutionist types of non-theistic organizations remain, the contemporary landscape of organized atheism has a great deal more diversity. This diversity can be to a certain extent explained by the improvements made in communication technologies such as the internet, as strong atheist discourse has exploded on online forums and community sites and

people that would normally not meet face to face to discuss atheism can now do so through sites such as Meetup.com. During my field research in 2007-2008, I found four categories of non-theistic groups (as defined by their organization and types of meetings, not by their stance towards abolition or substitution of traditional religions). These categories are a) national and international organizations, b) local organizations, c) Meetup groups, and d) online groups.

An examination of actual groups from all of these categories via participant observation, discussions with group organizer, and consumption of the online media provided by such groups reveals not only the similarities and differences between the types of organization, but also the fact that strong atheist activity in the West, rather than mere non-theism, has increased when and where religion has increased its presence in public life. Moreover, an analysis of strong atheism in these settings suggests that this activity is to a significant extent a result of the threat to a modern, secular normative order, or the “system of mutual benefit,” posed by aggressive, public religiosity. Just as religious and political conservatives increase their commitment to their respective ideologies in the face of normative threats, as discussed in chapter five, so too do atheists.

#### A) National Organizations

National level organizations devoted to atheism, rationalism, humanism, and secularism exist in many countries, from Canada to Australia to India, though it is Western countries where we find the most organizations and strong atheist activity. In addition, several

international organizations operate as well, normally as alliances of smaller, national organizations.<sup>98</sup>

In the United States, several national level organizations are devoted to the advancement of atheism, humanism, and secularism. All of these organizations publish monthly or bimonthly magazines, newsletters, or newspapers, hold annual conventions with hundreds of attendees who travel from across the country and well-known atheist speakers and encourage their members to write essays and letters to the editor in their local newspapers in support of atheist and secularism. As such, these organizations closely resemble other civil society organizations that work towards political objectives, including environmentalist organizations such as Greenpeace and civil rights organizations such as the National Rifle Association.

As mentioned above, American Atheists was founded in 1963 by Madalyn Murray O’Hair. It has existed continuously since, publishing American Atheist magazine as well as numerous books, sponsoring local groups, bringing lawsuits against government agencies if they are perceived to violate the establishment clause of the Constitution, and holding an annual convention on Easter weekend in a major American city.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation, founded by the Gaylor’s in 1976, also continues to grow. It is now the largest “freethought” organization in the United States with over 13,000 members (Freedom From Religion Foundation website). It publishes the newspaper *Freethought Today*, hosts an annual convention, broadcasts “freethought

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<sup>98</sup> The discussion below is not meant to serve as an exhaustive catalogue of national and international organizations, nor of the other categories of organized irreligion. Rather, it is meant as a survey of these categories with some notable and high-profile examples from each category.

radio” in Madison, Wisconsin, the organization’s headquarters, places advertisements for its organization and for non-theism in general on public buses and privately-owned billboards, and also brings lawsuits, complaints, and lobbyists to Washington D.C. in order to keep the United States government fully secular.

Other large organizations based in the US with similar goals and activities are the Center for Inquiry, which describes itself as the organization “the world needs....to oppose and supplant the mythological narratives of the past, and the dogmas of the present” and to be devoted to “promoting science, reason, freedom of inquiry, and humanist values” (Center for Inquiry website), Atheist Alliance International, The Brights, the American Humanist Association, and the Council for Secular Humanism. Besides their own activities, these organizations also jointly form the constituency for the Secular Coalition of America, a lobbying body founded in 2002 with offices in Washington D.C. in order to have a more direct impact on national affairs.

In the United Kingdom, two large national organizations make up the vast majority of organized non-theist activity, the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society. The BHA, as discussed above, assists in the provision of humanist ceremonies, such as weddings, funerals, and namings, and also lobbies on behalf of humanists for secular governance on such issues as faith schools and social services. Recently, the BHA participated in the beginnings of what has come to be known as the “atheist bus campaign” in several countries by holding a large fund-raising campaign to pay for the ads on the sides of buses, which raised over £150,000 by April 2009.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> The atheist bus campaign began as a response to a Christian bus campaign conducted by Jesussaid.org, which placed bible verses highlighting the idea that Jesus is the only way to salvation prominently on

The National Secular Society has continued its work since its founding by Charles Bradlaugh in 1866, affirming that “this life is the only one in which we have any knowledge and human effort should be directed wholly towards its improvement” and that “supernaturalism is based upon ignorance” and is the “historic enemy of progress” (National Secular Society website). It lobbies both the UK government and the European Union in matters of freedom of speech and expression, education, and employment discrimination based on religious affiliation.

In Denmark, the *Dansk Ateistisk Selskab* (Danish Atheist Company) began in 2002 and, while only having 40 members in 2004, saw membership leap to nearly 1,000 after the controversy surrounding the publication of cartoons representing the Muslim prophet Mohammed by a Danish newspaper in 2005. The group considers itself a “watchdog” group, speaking with the media about the issues of religion being taught in schools to Danish children and campaigning for a humanist perspective to be taught alongside a Christian one in such classes. The large Norwegian Humanist group, the Human Ethical Society, is also still in active, as is the Swedish Humanist group, which has recently worked to bring the atheist bus campaign to Sweden.

From speaking with numerous individuals in each of the above countries regarding their membership in such organizations, the benefits of such membership for individuals becomes clear. By joining these large, national organizations, individuals

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London buses. The advertisements suggested people go to a particular website that informed readers that they would burn in hell for eternity without the salvation provided by Jesus Christ. A comedy writer, Ariane Sherine thought a proper response to the ads would be “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” She published a short piece suggesting the possibility of placing this response on buses and received an enthusiastic response from other non-theists. After a short period of accepting donations, the BHA assisted in the creation of a website and donation system by which interested parties could donate money towards purchasing advertising space on buses for this message. With well over £150,000 donated, the buses have expanded from London to several UK cities and other atheist and humanist organizations in the US, Sweden, Finland, and Croatia have already purchased or plan to purchase similar advertising on buses (Atheist Campaign website).

express their support for the lobbying work these organizations undertake, they gain access to publications with news stories concerning atheist and humanism not normally covered by mainstream media,<sup>100</sup> and they gain access to the large conventions such organizations hold, which for a small percentage of strong atheists, constitutes one of their few opportunities to socialize with large numbers of individuals holding beliefs similar to their own.

## B) Local Organizations

In addition to larger, national organizations, there are also numerous local atheist, humanist, and rationalist groups in several Western countries. These groups are normally affiliated with one or more of the larger national level organizations, but retain a degree of independence.

In the United States, hundreds of such groups exist under the banner of atheism, rationalism, humanism, and freethought, and many are affiliated with larger national organizations such as American Atheists and the Center for Inquiry. St. Louis, Missouri, for example, has the oldest continuously existing group in the United States, the Rationalist Society of St. Louis (RSSL), founded in 1948 as well as a Society of Ethical Culture. The San Francisco Bay Area in California is home to several such groups, from San Francisco Atheists to East Bay Atheists, the Atheists of Silicon Valley, Atheists and Freethinkers of Contra Costa County, and the Rossmoor Atheists and Agnostics. Every state in the United States has such organizations, from the New York City Atheists and

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<sup>100</sup> This was a more significant motivator of membership prior to the rise of the internet in the 1990's, as most of the relevant news stories are now covered by online sources, such as blogs, that do not charge for access. Many non-theists, for example, utilize the news service provided by Richard Dawkins' website to keep pace with news stories related to atheism, humanism, and science.

Center for Inquiry—Harlem to Red River Freethinkers in North Dakota, the Atheist Community of Topeka, Kansas, and the Alabama Freethought Association.

In the United Kingdom, most local groups fall under the banner of humanism and are affiliated with the British Humanist Association. Thirteen such groups exist in the greater London area alone, including the Central London Humanist Group, the North London Humanist Group, and the Bromley Humanist Group. Humanist groups can also be found in Edinburgh, Oxford, Birmingham, Manchester, Cardiff, and Belfast.

In the United States and United Kingdom, such groups have face to face meetings anywhere from once a week to once every other month. Meetings are sometimes merely social in nature, giving members a chance to socialize and discuss news stories relevant to the topics of atheism, secularism, and religion with others who hold more in common with them regarding religion and politics than others in their immediate social circles, other times more formal, such as guest lectures by noted humanists and atheists, book discussions, and workshops on rhetoric and debating skills. Such meetings normally have between eight and twenty-five attendees, with some regulars and some individuals who come to such meetings less frequently. The gender ratio at such meetings varies between 70 men to 30 women at the atheist and rationalist meetings and 55 men to 45 women at humanist meetings. With the exception of the Center for Inquiry group in Harlem, New York, nearly all of the atheist and humanist groups are overwhelmingly white.

Many groups also have newsletters for their members that are published anywhere from once a month to four times a year, with the newsletters containing both relevant news as well as copies of letters to the editor written by local members in support of

secularism or against religion. Some groups also work, either on their own or with larger, national organizations, such as the FFRF in the United States, to publicize the presence of non-theism by placing advertisements on buses or billboards along interstate highways. The Alabama Freethought Association, for example, worked with the FFRF in 2009 to place a billboard ad along a highway near Birmingham that asked viewers, as John Lennon once asked, to “Imagine No Religion” (Associated Press, Tuscaloosa News 2009).<sup>101</sup>

Speaking with numerous individuals in several countries who are members of such groups and frequently attend their meetings, there are a few dominant reasons given for joining and attending. One of the most common reasons given, at least in the Midwestern part of the United States, is that such groups and meetings provide a type of secular sanctuary in the middle of the Bible Belt. “I need this just to vent sometimes, living where I do” said a male atheist from Kansas City. “I can’t talk to most people I know about this stuff without burning bridges fast” said another atheist from St. Louis. Another frequent reason given is that such groups allow individuals a chance to organize and participate in secular activism, such as street-tabling in New York City or organizing groups of atheist blood donors on the National Day of Prayer in the United States in order to counter the frequent claims of religious individuals that atheists cannot be moral people. A third frequent reason I heard from attendees is that such meetings provide them a chance to become more educated. “These are some smart folks here,” said an

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<sup>101</sup> The process of erecting such an ad was not straightforward, as the group originally sought to place the advertisement near the local airport but was turned back by Lamar Advertising Company, whose general manager found the ad “offensive:” ““You have to know what area of the country you’re in,” he said. “A heavy percent of our population is Christian. That’s who we cater to.” The group was only successful in erecting the sign after finding a company, Bentley Advertising, who was willing to place the ad (Associated Press, Tuscaloosa News 2009).

agnostic from St. Louis. “I learn something new just about every time we have a meeting.”

Local groups are rare in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway and the groups that do exist are much less active than their American and UK counterparts. The Danish Atheist Company, for example, does not meet regularly, with only occasional lectures, and does not have local affiliates in different Danish cities. Further, while they were able to hold a general assembly in 2009, there was not enough interest in earlier years for a large gathering for members.

In addition to the regional and city organizations discussed above, there is a subset of local organizations that have flourished since 2005. These are university-based student atheist, agnostic, and rationalist groups. Across both the United States and United Kingdom, dozens of such groups have been founded in the last few years, effectively ending the status of organized atheism as an “old guy” thing, as social psychologists Bruce Hunsberger and Robert Altemeyer have referred to it (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006). Members of these groups had their own meeting within the larger program of the 2008 American Atheist convention in Minneapolis, with over forty attendees. From the rising popularity of such groups in universities across both the US and the UK, larger, national organizations have also been created. In the United States, there is the Secular Student Alliance, which has existed since 2000 and has as its motto, “Mobilizing Students for a New Enlightenment.” In the United Kingdom, the National Federation of Atheist, Humanist, and Secular Student Societies or (AHS), was founded in 2008 with the vision of “a thriving atheist, humanist or secular student society in every institute of Higher Education in the UK, networked together, with a shared voice in

public life, whose members can contribute to and be part of the wider national and international movement” (Federation of Atheist, Humanist, and Secular Student Societies website).

In addition to localized atheist, rationalist, and freethought groups, more substitutionalist organizations, such as the Society for Ethical Culture and organized Humanism in America, also have local groups. There are, for example, over thirty Ethical Societies around the United States, with over ten in the New York metropolitan area alone. The activities of Ethical Societies, as well as Humanist Communities such as the one in Palo Alto, California differ noticeably from those of atheist and rationalist groups, as they normally have Sunday morning meetings in large halls, Sunday school classes for both children and adults, numerous potluck lunches after services, songs, and dramatic performances.

### C) Meetup Groups

In the last decade there has been a flourishing of a new type of atheist and humanist group, one less formal and with a more fluid membership and activities list. This is the Meetup group, named after the website that hosts and provides organizational software.

In an example of social science directly affecting society, Meetup.com was founded in 2001 after its creators read sociologist Robert Putnam’s examination of the loss of social capital and engagement in the United States, *Bowling Alone* (2000). They were inspired to use the internet to help revitalize local community engagement and the result was Meetup.com, a site that allows individuals to enter their zip code and interests and then shows them others who have expressed similar interests in their area and

provides a set of software tools allowing these individuals to communicate, form groups, and schedule in-person meetings (Kaiser 2004).

While the site has spawned thousands of groups in hundreds of cities around the world and formed an important element of grassroots political activism in recent American electoral campaigns, such as Howard Dean's presidential run in 2004, it has particularly been a boon for atheists and agnostics, many of whom either did not have any official local organization in their towns and small cities or did not find the more serious, discussion-based format of existing atheist and rationalist groups to their personal tastes. As of September 1, 2009, there were 392 atheist Meetup groups in nine countries, with the vast majority in the United States, and 47,498 individual members. The New York City Atheist Meetup group, for example, has well over 800 members and the St. Louis Area Atheist Meetup group has over 400. The Copenhagen Atheist Meetup group, by contrast, has 29 members, reflecting both the lower use of Meetup in Scandinavia in general and the general lack of interest in participating in any type of organized atheism or rationalism on the part of most Scandinavians.<sup>102</sup>

With the exception of the London Atheist Meetup Group, that is much more similar to traditional organized atheist and rationalist groups in its focus on discussing and debating facets of atheism and religion and its very organized format, atheist Meetup groups are much more informal and socially oriented. They normally do not have a set meeting place but instead utilize restaurants, coffee shops, pubs, and bars. Some, including the St. Louis area Atheist Meetup group, have also branched out to organize a

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<sup>102</sup> As further evidence of both the fact that Meetup.com is a heavily English-speaking site and the fact that there exists little interest in organized atheism in Denmark, as the majority of the 29 members are not Danish. In fact, there are quite a few Americans, and the first Meetup of the Copenhagen group I attended had mostly American attendees.

number of other activities such as bowling and movie nights and trips to museums and zoos.

Meetup groups attract large numbers of individuals who have no interest in joining more formal, discussion based groups. “I like that we can just get together for a coffee or beer and talk,” said a young female agnostic at a St. Louis Area Atheist Meetup when I asked her why she did not join a more formal organization. “I took a look at the Rationalist Society website and it all looked a bit too serious for me....I mean...we don’t even talk about atheism all the time at these meetings; we can just talk about music or movies or whatever. I like it just because I know that I’m talking to someone who’s intelligent and not going to go all religious on me in the middle of a conversation.”

Meetup groups also attract a noticeably younger crowd of members than more traditional groups, a fact partially explained by the fact that it is an internet-based social networking phenomenon and partially explained by the fact that large numbers of young singles in their 20’s and 30’s utilize Meetup groups as a way of meeting new potential partners.

This being said, there are many people involved with the Meetup groups who do wish to have more serious discussions regarding atheism and religion. These individuals tend to find one another within the larger, more general meetings and also use the Meetup site to schedule smaller more focused discussion sessions.

#### D) Online Groups

The internet has been a boom to many forms of organized non-theistic and strong atheistic discussion and activity, from the creation of discussion boards and support groups for recent apostates to helping mobilize like minded people in activist efforts.

While national level atheist organizations have conventions once a year and local organizations have meetings up to once a week, online groups allow constant interaction and, in many cases, nearly instantaneous feedback on discussion topics. Further, online groups allow individuals to participate in or merely observe discussions about a variety of relevant topics pertaining to atheism, religion, secularism, science, and philosophy and to do so at their convenience, with no set meeting times, topics, or membership dues. And for those living in religious households or neighbourhoods and wanting to keep their involvement in such groups private, the internet offers flexibility in both location and time, allowing individuals to participate in these groups and to keep this participation private if they so choose. Consequently, the number of individuals involved in online groups and message boards devoted to atheism and humanism is many times the number of individuals who are members of “real world” organizations, whether national or local.

The social networking site Facebook, for instance, besides offering its users their own pages to display their photos and interests, also allows users to join groups, most of which give members the ability to post videos or news stories for all members to see as well as access to a discussion board in which an individual user can post a comment or question and receive feedback from any interested members and observers can read entire conversations and debates that have already taken place. There are several large Facebook groups for non-theists, including Atheist, Agnostic, and Non-Religious, a group with over 45,000 members and dozens of active discussion threads every day, and Government + Religion = Disaster, a group with over 100,000 members that normally has at least three active discussion topics per day. Other notable non-theistic groups on Facebook include Agnostic in Theory-Atheist in Practice, Libertarian Atheists, If I

Weren't an Atheist, I'd Think that Richard Dawkins was God, and Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. A similar set of groups exists on the competing social networking site, Myspace, including Atheist and Agnostic Group III, which has over 37,000 members and dozens of message board posts per day.

There have also been several attempts at a specifically atheist social networking site, though most of these attempts have failed. One of the most successful to this point has been Atheist Nexus ([atheistnexus.org](http://atheistnexus.org)), which provides many of the features of social networking sites, such as profiles, friends, and messaging but caters solely to atheists. Members can also create sub-groups within the site, such as Atheist Humor, Carl Sagan fan group, and Atheist Singles. Atheist Nexus began in 2008 and within one year grew to 10,000 members.

Besides groups on these very popular social networking websites, there also exist numerous explicitly atheist websites that, in addition to offering news stories and commentary by a select group of individuals, also offer discussion boards and the ability to comment and discuss the news story posts, which allows casual users to read both a story and dozens, if not hundreds, of comments about that story from interested members of the site. Sites with these features include Richard Dawkins' website, [richarddawkins.net](http://richarddawkins.net), biologist P.Z. Myers blog Pharyngula, Hemant Mehta's Friendly Atheist, and the James Randi Educational Foundation website, which contains a forum with over 21,000 registered users.

In addition to the more general atheist sites listed above, there also exist more targeted websites for those individuals who are considering or who have recently become apostates from Christianity and Islam. These sites offer not only discussion forums and

essays but also hundreds of testimonials from individuals who have left the religious tradition in question describing their process of leaving and the difficulties, both personal and social, they have faced since making their decisions to become apostates. For those leaving the Christian tradition, one of the most popular websites is *exchristian.net*, while for those leaving the Muslim tradition, one of the most popular is *apostatesofislam.com*.

Organized atheist activity on the internet does not only help foster discussion, debate, and support. It also has the power to spread new ideas that otherwise may have had quite a limited lifespan and also the power to mobilize large numbers of individuals to participate in activism, such as writing large numbers of emails and complaints in the face of what is perceived as discrimination.

A famous example of the former is the rise in popularity of the “Flying Spaghetti Monster” as a fake deity and the number of individuals who identify themselves as “pastafarians.” In 2005, Robert Henderson sent an open, satirical letter to the Kansas State Board of Education, which was holding hearings in an effort to introduce intelligent design into Kansas classrooms. In the letter, Henderson wrote that if they were to teach intelligent design, they must acknowledge and teach the various types of intelligent design, including the version that the universe was created recently by a flying spaghetti monster, who also makes it seem as if the earth is much older than it is by changing scientific results “with his noodly appendage” (Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster website).

The board did not respond to the letter immediately and it seemed as if little would come of the letter or the Flying Spaghetti Monster. Then Henderson posted the open letter to a website. Numerous blog writers and internet news sites picked up on the

letter within days and the story and the notion of a Flying Spaghetti Monster exploded in popularity, moving from the internet to several major newspapers, including the New York Times. Books, art, t-shirts, and car emblems have since been marketed and widely sold, numerous tribute websites to the Flying Spaghetti Monster have been published, and thousands of individuals list “pastafarian” as their religion on social networking sites such as Facebook. Without the internet, it is unlikely that Henderson’s letter would have been able to receive the amount of attention that it did.

Recent examples of the internet helping in activism efforts concerning atheism and secularism include several incidents concerning automobile license plates in the United States. While several U.S. states offer religiously themed license plates, such as Indiana’s “In God We Trust” plate, and many others allow religiously themed personal license plates, such as “Jesus4U,” several non-theists have had their requests for non-theistic license plates denied by various departments of motor vehicles, including Louisiana’s, which at first rejected the license plate “Godless,” and Indiana’s department, which rejected the plate, “No Gods.” While the “godless” plate was approved after an appeal letter from the man requesting it, the “No Gods” plate was not approved based on the following regulation:

“Personalized license plates allow creativity; however, under Indiana Statue IC 9-18-15-4 (b) the BMV may refuse to issue a combination of letters or numerals, or both, that carry a connotation offensive to good taste and decency.

The BMV will deny a personalized license plate request if an objective, reasonable person would find that the customer’s proposed expression on the personalized license plate application is determined to carry a connotation offensive to good taste and decency, is misleading, or is otherwise prohibited.” (quoted in Mehta, 2009).

The story of the rejection of the “no gods” plate was posted online by several noted atheist sites, including the Friendly Atheist (Mehta 2009) and Austin Cline’s About.com page on Atheism and Agnosticism (Cline 2009). While the license plate seeker had already contacted both the American Civil Liberties Union and the Freedom From Religion Foundation, numerous readers took up the cause by emailing the Indiana Bureau of Motor Vehicles to express their displeasure and put pressure on the BMV to approve the plate, which they did a few weeks later. While it is difficult to ascertain causality, it is doubtful that emails from residents of Indiana and the threat of the story going national with an ACLU or FFRF lawsuit had nothing to do with the BMV’s move to approve the plate.

### Variation in Strong Atheism and Community

The diversity in types of atheist groups discussed above reflects diversity in both the views and desires of individual non-theists. There exists variability in the views that individual non-theists have regarding the moral appropriateness of publicly attacking religion, with some being relatively neutral about religion’s role in the world and impact on society and others being strong atheists, viewing religion as intrinsically harmful. There also exists variability in the degree to which individual non-theists wish to belong to a “community” of people, with some individuals desiring to belong in a close-knit community of people with an emphasis on social events and involving family members, and other individuals desiring to avoid such communities and focus more on discussion, debate, and activism. Within this diversity, however, a clear international pattern emerges. The more religious beliefs assert themselves in public life as markers of proper

national identity or as part of specific laws and displays, the more strong-atheist activity, as opposed to mere non-theism, we will find in a given country.

Numerous Meetup group members, for instance, do not agree with what they see as the strong atheism of more traditional atheist and rationalist groups, including the young agnostic woman from St. Louis mentioned above, who said after looking at the RSSL website and newsletter and picking up on a real “anti-religious vibe,” “that’s just not the type of person I am.....This is more my speed here.”

While this young agnostic rejects strong atheism by merely saying “this is more my speed here,” others are more explicit in their reasons for choosing Meetup groups and/or humanist/ethical culture groups than atheist or rationalist ones. A 45 year old self-identified “atheist humanist” and member of a national humanist organization from New York City, for example, articulates a criticism of strong atheism in many ways similar to strong atheist criticisms of religion. “They’re rocking the boat, man,” he said of strong atheist groups like American Atheists and noted authors such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. “People can believe what they want to believe. These guys come in and say to everyone, ‘you have to think like me or the world is going to end.’ Now where have I heard that before? Hmmm. They’re trying to get people to think like them and make it seem like you’re a bad person if you don’t. They’re almost as bad as the fundie wackos...all of them want to tell you what to think and how to live.” The reference to “rocking the boat” is particularly striking here, as it appears to refer to something resembling Taylor’s notion of a system of mutual benefit. The idea seems to be that if everyone would leave the beliefs of others alone and let them believe what they wish, the “boat” would stay afloat and the society could function normally, with little

unnecessary friction between those with opposing viewpoints. Strong atheists, like religious fundamentalists, wish to impose their views on everyone else, frequently threatening everyone with the prospects of severe consequences if they do not change, but instead of an eternity in hell the threat is the end of the civilization courtesy of a religious zealot with nuclear weapons.

Many members of strong atheist organizations, of course, disagree, and are of the view that belonging to such groups and other strong atheist activity, such as wearing atheist t-shirts and displaying atheist bumper stickers on their cars, is not only perfectly legitimate but necessary. When I asked one man in San Francisco about his atheist shirt and whether or not he felt that he was “rocking the boat,” he answered: “I’ve got no problems rocking the boat when the boat is headed for the rocks of religious violence. I tell you, this tribalism, and religion is the worst form of tribalism....just look at the jihadis....., this could all just bring down civilization as we know it if some of these guys get nukes.... We’ve got to get rid of this mind-virus!” Similarly, a frequent commentator on an online atheist group responded to the charge that strong atheists were “strident” by saying, “Personally, I think now is the exact time for ‘strident.’ Hell, I think we’re not being strident enough.”

For those individuals who are non-theistic without being strong atheists, the casual conversations of some of the Meetup group meetings, or the more positively oriented humanist and ethical culture groups are ideal, as the more strongly atheist groups make them uncomfortable. For those individuals who are strong atheists however, and do desire to combat religious beliefs and religious influence on government, strong

atheist groups are ideal. They provide a place to debate ideas, keep abreast of news developments, and coordinate activist responses to perceived violations of secularism.

Besides reflecting the different stances non-theists have towards the moral appropriateness of criticizing religion, the diversity of non-theistic organizations also reflects the differing amounts of desire individual non-theists have for belonging to a close-knit community. A common saying among non-theists is that “organizing atheists is like herding cats,” pointing to the fact that non-theists are normally weary of statements, policies, or agendas that demand deference, whether they be religious or non-religious. Non-theists are, most commonly, individualists or, as some refer to themselves, “freethinkers.” And indeed, many atheists I talked to during my field research were unnerved to hear details about organizations such as humanist communities and ethical societies. A young male atheist from St. Louis, for example, said that he got “the creeps” after visiting an ethical society Sunday service, as it reminded him too much of his more conservative religious upbringing. “The sanctuary, the ushers shaking your hand and acting like they know you and ask how you’re doing, the songs.... The whole thing made me very uneasy. I don’t care if they’re theists or not.” When asked if all these things did not work to create a more intimate community, he said, “Well, community sounds well and good until you’re shaking hands with all these overly-friendly people. I just wonder what they’re about, you know. I’m just not sure if I get it.” Another young atheist, this one from New York, eschewed all “face to face” atheist groups, preferring online discussion boards: “I’m there to talk about issues, man. Not to get all social. People weird me out talking about atheist community and what ‘atheists’ believe.”

Other non-theists embrace such communities, sometimes even explicitly mentioning how they envy the religious for their tight-knit communities and family involvement. Several members of the Palo Alto Humanist Community, for example, expressed to me how much they appreciated the Community and all of the relationships it has allowed them to form. “I know some of these people just as well as I know some of my own family members. I really enjoy that sense of togetherness” said a middle-aged Humanist woman at a post-Sunday service potluck lunch. “I’m just so happy that I can bring my kids here and have them socialize with the other kids in the Sunday school while I’m just in the other room listening to the program.” “Humanism’s not something that ‘I’ do, but it’s something that ‘we’ do” said another Humanist.

Some non-theists not fortunate enough to be a part of such a community or have one available to them, express their regret openly. Rick, a humanist living in London, for example, frequently attends one of the many London-based humanist groups, which offer evening socials in pubs and coffee houses, as well as more formal talks, but not Sunday Schools and a sanctuary with ushers and a program. “This [referring to the meeting in which this conversation occurred] is great and all. But I just wish there was something for my family, for all of our families. I would really like to see us be a real community. Pub socials are nice, but they’re not for my wife or my kids.”

From the above, it is clear that variation exists between individual non-theists in whether or not they are themselves strong atheists and support the public criticism of religion, as well as whether or not they desire to be a part of a close-knit community of like-minded people. Non-theism involves merely the lack of a belief in the existence of supernatural agents. Strong atheism involves a moral viewpoint that such beliefs and

practices are normatively wrong and harmful and strong atheist activity involves the expression of strong atheism through actions such as joining strong atheist groups, attempting to persuade others to give up religious beliefs, and aggressively seeking to keep religious influence out of government.

Within this variation, however, a pattern emerges, one that can be seen both geographically and chronologically. That pattern is that strong atheism, in both sentiment and activity, is more prevalent in places and times in which religions are seen as gaining power in public life and government, and consequently threatening the modern secular society of mutual benefit and individual liberty. That is, in places and times in which the secular normative order is being threatened, many individuals' commitment to the principles of secularism and atheism increase to the point of proclaiming themselves strong atheists and, in some cases, seeking to get involved in organized atheism.

Geographically, there are clear differences between Western nations in levels of strong atheist activity. Of the three nations in which I spent a significant amount of time during my field research, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Denmark, the US has by far the most strong atheist activity while Denmark has the least. The United Kingdom sat in between. This ranking, from most strong atheist activity to least, matches the perceived level of attempted religious influence on government in these countries.

In the United States, there are hundreds of atheist and rationalist groups, most of which meet regularly and focus less on community building and family events and more on discussing, debating, and organizing. There are, for example, well over 100 university campus groups alone. Further, while a minority, many of these localized groups meet more than once a month. In some cases, such as the Rationalist Society of St. Louis,

meetings are held weekly and an email list-service produces several email messages a day from members.

The United States also possesses several national level organizations that hold large, annual conventions to which hundreds of committed members drive or fly many hundreds of miles to attend. At these conventions, strong atheism is on open and constant display, from the titles of the books being sold at the merchandise tables to the free atheist paraphernalia, including wrist bracelets and bumper stickers with such slogans as “Science, it works bitches” and “The Bible, Where Life Begins at Deception,” to the conversations heard between attendees, which commonly involve marvelling at the “stupidity” of religious people and coordinating actions as to how to best keep religious ideas out of classrooms and government.

It was also in the United States, through my attendance at such meetings and conventions, that I heard more jokingly violent and harsh statements regarding religion, including statements about letting the fundamentalist Christians and Muslims have their “crusades” and “kill each other off” and more insulting characterizations of religious people, such as “bat shit crazy” and “emotionally crippled.”

Strong atheist activities in America go beyond meetings and in-house statements, however, and also involve more public outreach. The United States also has a wide variety of strongly atheist media, from American Atheists’ television show, now broadcast primarily online, entitled *The Atheist Viewpoint* to New York City Atheist’s public access shows *This Week in Atheism*, *Atheists Book Club*, and *Atheists in History* to internet broadcasts such as *The Infidel Guy* and *The Rational Response Squad*, which started the “Blasphemy Challenge” in 2006, a challenge for people to publicly, through

posting a youtube video, deny the existence of God and the Holy Spirit and thus, supposedly, commit an unforgivable sin.

While strong atheism certainly exists in the United Kingdom, it is by no measure as widespread or as consistently vociferous as in the United States. There is indeed the London Atheist Meetup group, which, judging by the four sessions I attended, is as strong and vociferous as any group in the United States, with members frequently making such statements as “there is nothing good about religion whatsoever” and that religious fundamentalists will “be the death of us all.” And it is true that the United Kingdom is the country of origin for the Atheist Bus Campaign, which has now spread to numerous other countries.

That being said, it is nevertheless the case that the vast majority of humanist groups in the United Kingdom, as well as student secular and atheist societies are much less outspoken in both their denial of the existence of any supernatural agencies and less condemning in their moral views on religion in general. Rather, both in their online materials and in their meetings, humanists, atheists, and agnostics in the United Kingdom are more likely to limit their criticisms of religion to specific harms, such as honour killings of Muslim women, and to what they see as too much religious influence in public life, such as the movement to have public services conducted by religious organizations, a process that was encouraged by the Labour government under Tony Blair and that stimulated many discussions and campaigns on the part of the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society.

Besides this difference in tone, it is also the case that the United Kingdom’s humanist and atheist groups do not have annual conventions in anything approaching the

scale or intensity of those in the United States. Instead of a whole weekend of speeches and book signings and tables full of anti-religious bumper stickers, the events hosted by the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society are much more low-key affairs, normally singular lectures or a short series of workshops concerning evolution, Darwin, or secularism. Moreover, there are very few television, radio, and internet radio figures in the UK broadcasting a strong atheist message, though comedian Pat Condell's website, which he labels as "godless comedy," is certainly one such production, as Condell frequently stresses the immorality of religion and the ignorance, stupidity, and "barbarity" of many religious people.

While the United Kingdom contains less strong atheist sentiment and activity than the United States, it contains substantially more than the Scandinavian countries. Throughout my stay in Denmark, for example, I met non-theists who refused to accept the label "atheist," associating it with overconfidence in the conclusion that there exists nothing "more between heaven and earth" and a crusading mentality against religion, which they found off-putting

Moreover, organized atheism in Scandinavia, and in particular Denmark, is both a small and recent phenomena. There were no organized atheist or secularist organizations of any consequence, for instance, until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and those that have existed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Denmark have had small numbers of members and minimal activity in relation to meetings and campaigns. Upon my arrival in Denmark, for example, I set out, like I did in the United States and the United Kingdom, to find atheist and humanist groups in order to attend their meetings. This was quite a difficult task, as the existing organizations, such as the Danish Atheist Company, do not hold regular

meetings. Moreover, as mentioned above, when I finally did find a group that had meetings, the Copenhagen Atheist Meetup Group, I found that the majority of those in attendance were American expatriates. Further, the founder of the group wrote on the group's Meetup.com message board that she was frequently asked by Danes the purpose of the group, because, according to the questioner, "we're all atheists here anyway" and "religion isn't an issue."

One fact that must be dealt with when making the claim that Scandinavia has a much lower presence of strong atheism than the United States or the United Kingdom, however, is the existence of the Norwegian Humanist Association, which, with its 73,000 members, is the largest non-theistic organization in the world, an especially striking fact given Norway's population is under 5 million.

The answer as to why Norway, and Norway alone out of the Scandinavian countries, has such a large Humanist Association has to do with the services that they are able to provide as an organization. In Norway, the Humanist Association is recognized officially by the government as a religious denomination, allowing them to provide weddings, naming ceremonies, confirmations, and funerals, those rites of passage that are the domain of the national church in Denmark, and also to receive money from the government in order to conduct their affairs. Consequently, the organization is able to attain both publicity and legitimacy, allowing thousands of Norwegians who would otherwise be forced to utilize the churches for these rites of passage an opportunity to officially switch their affiliation from the national church to the Humanist Association and obtain access to non-religious ceremonies. Neither Denmark nor Sweden has humanist or atheist groups recognized by the government as denominations deserving the

same tax funding and recognition as religious organizations. Even civil weddings and funerals are still held in churches.

Thus, joining the Norwegian Humanist Association is not analogous to joining a national level atheist or humanist organization in the United States, United Kingdom, or even Denmark. In these countries, such an action is a clear statement about one's feelings towards religion. In Norway, however, joining the Humanist Association need not necessarily involve an active stance against religion but can merely be a way to have non-religious ceremonies.

These geographical differences in strong atheist activity, from the United States, with a high level of strong atheism, to Denmark, with a very low level of strong atheism, match closely with the degree to which religion is enmeshed in public life and the degree to which religious beliefs appear to be influencing governmental policy. As discussed in chapter five, religious beliefs have long been associated with the normative order of the United States; to be a proper American, in the minds of the vast majority of Americans throughout the history of the country, is to be hard-working and God-fearing. Consequently, despite the separation of church and state established in the US Constitution, multitudes of religious individuals throughout the history of the United States have sought to insert religious references, beliefs, and identities into public life and policy, from President Eisenhower working with Congress in the 1950's in order to introduce the words "under God" to the pledge of allegiance, to school boards in Kansas and Pennsylvania attempting to have creationism or intelligent design taught in science classes alongside evolutionary theory, to contemporary attempts to re-establish some form of prayer in schools under the guise of "moments of silence," to the introduction of

religiously themed license plates in several US states, to a recent mayoral candidate in Oklahoma pushing for a creationist display in a local zoo, to George W. Bush's push for "faith based initiatives" and his and many other American politicians' constant use of religious language. Consequently, there is much in American public affairs and politics to concern non-theists and those who see America primarily as a secular, rather than Christian, nation.

The United Kingdom, while still having an official state church in the Church of England, has seen a steady decline of religion in public life and attempts at inserting religious beliefs into governing policy over the 20th century. There is, for instance, much less opposition to abortion and gay marriage on religious grounds in the United Kingdom than the United States. Consequently, there is less reason for non-theists to see religious individuals as a threat to individual liberty.

The United Kingdom does, however, have a more significant amount of religiosity in public life than Scandinavian nations. The Labour Government in the late 1990's and early 2000's, for instance, was seen by many in the UK as undermining secularism by its championing the role of religious groups in providing social services and also advocating public funding for the country's faith schools (Beattie 2007). This issue, along with smaller concerns such as including a secular, humanist perspective on the BBC radio 4's *Thought for the Day* segment, which has previously been given by religious figures, was consistently evident in the discourse of humanist and atheist groups I visited in the UK.

In comparison to the United States and the United Kingdom, Denmark, as discussed in chapter five, exhibits little religious influence in the public sphere.<sup>103</sup> Religion is, as many Danes related to me in person, to Phil Zuckerman during his stay in Denmark (2008), and to those individuals seeking to start atheist groups, a “non-issue” in Denmark. It is not seen as a crucial element of Danish identity. Consequently, there is little reason for politicians to make concessions to religious lobbies. Moreover, the organization of the state church itself helps prevent the intrusion of religion in politics. The Danish National Church is called a “state church,” yet it has no central, official body. It is, instead, a voluntary organization in which individual congregations have a high degree of autonomy. There are no obvious mechanisms by which an entity called “the church,” then, can apply pressure to the government, as each denomination has its own views. Furthermore, the majority of Danes who are not only members of the National Church but who also actually believe in the existence of God and practice their religion to some extent practice a liberalized version of Christianity that makes few demands on individual behaviour. Consequently, they are unlikely to lobby the Danish government to institute religious rules of behaviour for the country. There is, then, little cause for non-theists in Denmark to feel that the secular nature of their government is being threatened.

The above paragraphs present differences between the United States, United Kingdom, and Denmark in both levels of strong atheist activity and levels of religious involvement in government and public life. The implication is that the more religion asserts itself in government and public life, the more strong atheist activity we see in

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<sup>103</sup> That is, as long as we keep “religion” to mean beliefs and practices related to the existence of supernatural agencies. As discussed in chapter five, one can easily see religious influences on public life in Denmark in the form of the secularized welfare state, which has its origins in traditions of Lutheran ministry and particular Lutheran figures such as Grundtvig.

response. This claim is not only supported by the geographic evidence presented above, but also more direct chronological evidence of strong atheist activity rising in the same locale in response to particular intrusions of religious beliefs and concerns into public life and government.

In Denmark, for example, a clear increase in strong atheist activity occurred after the controversy surrounding the publication of the Mohammed cartoons in September of 2005. On 30 September, 2005, the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, published a set of twelve cartoon representations of the prophet Mohammed. Not only did these cartoons violate many Muslims' belief that no pictorial representations of Mohammed should be produced or published, but several of the cartoons associated the religion of Islam with violence, including one depicting the head of Mohammed wrapped in a turban containing a bomb with a lit fuse. The reaction of many Muslims in Denmark, Syria, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Iran, after word of the cartoons was spread in early 2006, was outrage, with large-scale protests, attacks on Danish embassies, and boycotts of Danish products (Anderson 2006).

Membership in the Danish Atheist Company had been steadily increasing since its beginnings in 2002, though it still only had around 40 members in 2004. The membership, as of the summer of 2008, stands at nearly 1000, with the biggest jump in membership occurring at the end of 2005 and the beginning of 2006, precisely as the cartoon controversy spread. Leadership within the Danish Atheist Company rightly point out that their membership had been increasing before the controversy and that they were and are working on their own to increase their membership. Yet, from what I heard from individual Danes, these efforts coincided with a jump in anti-Muslim feeling within the

country, a feeling that sometimes led to the view that religion in general is the problem and that Denmark must stand as a non-religious, secular country against such religious intimidation. In a downtown Copenhagen pub, for instance, after I asked a young Danish atheist if he would consider joining a group such as the Danish Atheist Company, he responded: “I would have to consider it. I’m quite worried about where the country may go if we give into these Muslim fanatics. There are just too many people giving in, just not wanting to appear racist. I’m not racist. I just don’t want to have to be quiet and live in fear of some Muslim attack if I criticize Islam or someone else criticizes Islam. We’re not a religious country and we have rights. This includes the right to say something bad about religion and Islam.”<sup>104</sup>

Another notable example of a rise in strong atheist activity in the wake of religion asserting itself in public life is the atheist bus campaign discussed above. The bus campaign was not unprovoked atheist activism in opposition to “religion,” in general. Rather, it was a specific response to a set of numerous and very prominent Christian advertisements placed on London buses from an organization called “Proclaiming Truth in London,” which hosts a website, [jesussaid.org](http://jesussaid.org), to which the ads refer viewers. The writer Ariane Sherine, in her effort to start an atheist bus campaign, was objecting specifically to the fact that when one goes to [jesussaid.org](http://jesussaid.org), one finds the message that one will spend an eternity in hell if one rejects the Christian offer of salvation. She saw this as fear-mongering and thought a proper response would be “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” In this instance, if the Christian

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<sup>104</sup> While many, including the atheist quoted here, define Denmark as a non-religious country in opposition to the “religious insanity” of Islam, others reassert Denmark’s Christian heritage, arguing that Christianity, and especially Danish Christianity, is a peaceful and enlightened religion as opposed to Islam (Dencik 2007).

organization had not placed numerous large advertisements proclaiming that Jesus is the only way to salvation on a whole fleet of London buses, this particular strong atheist campaign would never have occurred.

Besides these specific instances, it is also the case that what has been called the “new atheist” movement, that is, the rise in strong atheist discourse and activism since the early 2000’s, as seen in membership numbers in atheist organizations and book sales of strong atheist books such as those of Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins, has been in part caused by the reassertion of religion in public affairs and government through the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and the presidency of George W. Bush. Both of these key events appear to have made clear to many non-theists that religious beliefs and behaviours are not disappearing quietly but rather are still affecting world events in a significant and harmful way.

Regarding strong atheist discourse, it is clear that September 11<sup>th</sup> and the Bush presidency have been crucial drivers of the “new atheism.” Sam Harris, for instance, began to write his anti-religious volume, *The End of Faith* immediately after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, dismayed that the public response was for religious tolerance rather than a rational assessment of the irrationality of religious belief and its connection to violent extremism (Saltman 2006; Adler 2006). Furthermore, Richard Dawkins was told by his literary agent not to write a book like *The God Delusion* in the late 1990’s. Around 2004-2005, however, he was told that the time was right. Dawkins relates that his agent “was thinking of the American context and what happened was George Bush. I mean I think in the Clinton era there was no feeling of an oppressive theocracy while under George Bush there was. And if we would have had much more of him, or

somebody like him, the United States very well might have turned into something very unpleasant” (BBC Newsnight 2009).

Dawkins and his literary agent’s assessment of the American context fits well with my own experiences with strong atheists in the United States, many of whom only became active, by joining local and national atheist organizations and beginning to self-identify as atheists, in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the Bush presidency. A middle-aged male atheist from Kansas City, for instance, gave me this answer in response to my question as to why he joined American Atheists: “I joined in 2003. 9-11 was bad enough. I saw then what religious craziness can do. It ain’t going away. But then Bush and his cronies, they just ooze religion. Talking about saving the country “one soul at a time” and the “wonder working power” of America.... I mean...I was raised in a Pentecostal church; I know those references. And I just can’t believe his round-the-world crusades stuff... like he’s some sort of Christian warrior against evil. Are you kidding me? This guy’s supposed to be the President of the United States! This stuff is endangering America. It’s got to stop.”

Given the history of the United States and the importance of religious beliefs and identity, Bush was by no means the first politician to bring his conservative Christianity to Washington. Yet, for many atheists I spoke with, Bush was seen as more dangerous. An older female agnostic from St. Louis, for example, told me when I asked her what was so special about Bush: “I thought religion was over and done with. I mean, not that no one was religious anymore, but that I could turn on the TV and not have my President telling me to be a good Christian. There were always the right-wing nutjobs for Reagan, Bush one, and Clinton. But with Bush it was like they were in control. He was

appointing Fundie doctors to advisor positions in the administration, guys that think that women shouldn't have birth control and all that. It's just nuts.”

National level organizations in both the United States and the United Kingdom have greatly prospered in the 2000's. The Freedom From Religion Foundation in the United States, for example, maintained a membership of around 4000 people for close to 10 years with little increase. After 2001, a more rapid period of growth begins and, by 2004, there are just under 6000 members. In 2005, however, after Bush's re-election, the publication of *The End of Faith*, and new recruitment and publicity efforts by the FFRF, membership jumped by another 1,000, while between 2006 and 2007, with the continued Bush presidency and the publication of *The God Delusion*, membership dramatically increased to nearly 13,000 (Barker and Gaylor, personal communication).

A similar scenario occurred in the United Kingdom with the British Humanist association. There was a period of steady growth after 2001 and then, in 2004-2006, with the continued Bush presidency and the support for it from Tony Blair, Blair's own perceived anti-secularity, the Mohammed cartoons, the publication of *The End of Faith* and the airing of Dawkins' anti-religious documentary, *The Root of All Evil*, as well as the recruitment efforts of the BHA itself (which leadership in the BHA see as a primary cause), membership leaped from under 4000 to over 6000 (BHA, Churchill, personal communication).

Speaking with several atheists and humanists in London and Oxford, it became clear that a significant factor in many individuals either joining the British Humanist Association or the National Secular Society during this time was perceived “religious privilege” in the Blair government and the spectre of both a fundamentalist Muslim world

and a fundamentalist Christian America threatening “the rest of us” with their dogmatism.

The pattern in Western countries, then, seems clear. When the religious are seen by the non-religious as inserting religious beliefs and behavioural demands into the public sphere and into government policy, many of the non-religious noticeably increase their strong atheist sentiments and behaviours, from verbally attacking religious beliefs as dangerous delusions and religious believers as deluded weaklings to joining local and national organizations.

What does this pattern show? Why would we see this increase in strong atheist sentiment and activity in the face of religion’s insertion into the public sphere? A possible answer lies in the discussion of normative threat in chapter five. There, I outlined the work of political scientist Karen Stenner, who has conducted both large surveys and laboratory studies on the effects of a variety of normative threats, that is, threats to the “oneness and sameness,” (which, in modern pluralistic societies, are common authority and shared values), on “groupish” behaviours and sentiments (Stenner 2005). For example, Stenner primed white participants in both surveys and laboratory studies with such threats as belief diversity within the country, the quality of country’s leaders, and blacks gaining relative to whites and found that such threats to the security of “White America,” she encouraged more authoritarian, pro-white judgments and recommendations among those with conservative leanings.

Importantly for the discussion of strong atheist reactions to religion, Stenner found a similar but opposite effect for participants with strong liberal tendencies. In the face of these same primes concerning belief diversity and blacks gaining relative to

whites, socially liberal white Americans actually increased their commitment to their liberal vision of America, disagreeing even more strongly with conservative and racist sentiments and more strongly opposing conservative policies. The implication is that threatening stimuli, such as belief diversity or the prospect of the policies of outgroups being implemented, can encourage greater commitment to what one sees as the proper normative order of society, whether this order be conservative or liberal. It is not the case, then, that all threats encourage conservatism, but that such threats are relative to the content of one's view of the normative order, or, to use Taylor's terminology, one's "social imaginary," a conception of what society is, what it is for, and what makes one a proper member.

What appears to be occurring among strong atheists, then, is that their vision of what modern society is and should be, as well as what makes one a proper member of that society, is normatively threatened by the presence of more conservatively religious individuals in public life and the attempt by many of these individuals' attempts to introduce religiously inspired policies and public symbols, such as erecting monuments to the ten commandments of the Hebrew Bible in American courtrooms. Throughout the duration of my fieldwork in the United States, for example, I heard from self-identified atheists, agnostics, and humanists who felt both fear and anger at the prospects of a continuation of the policies of George W. Bush through the election of a Republican president in 2008. The primary concern was the fact that several Supreme Court justices would be retiring during the administration of the next President and that, if a Republican were elected, the Supreme Court would have a conservative majority and the United

States would move towards a theocratic state, with prayers being reinstated in public schools, Roe vs. Wade overturned, and homosexuality and blasphemy being outlawed.

This concern with theocracy is reflected in the activist work of lawyer Eddie Tabash, who frequently speaks at atheist and humanist conventions about the threat to personal freedom of conscience and behaviour posed by the religious right in American politics. At the American Atheist convention in Minneapolis in 2008, he was particularly focused on the Presidential election and the possibility of a religiously conservative Supreme Court slowly turning the United States into a theocracy. The concern is also reflected in such websites as [theocracywatch.org](http://theocracywatch.org), which offers a large amount of information on the background of the Christian right in the United States and their explicit goals to combat “secular humanism,” as well as the websites of many large national organizations such as American Atheists and the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

I found similar concerns among many atheists, especially in the United States. A young atheist in St. Louis, for example, told me that vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin “scares the crap” out of her. When I asked in particular what the fear entailed, she responded, “Next stop, ladies and gentlemen, theocracy. You won’t have the right to disagree with Christianity and all its bullshit patriarchal morals.” A few others were quite open about these fears motivating them to join activist efforts, from joining local atheist Meetup groups and reading books by Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens in order to become more educated on the issues to joining national level organizations such as Americans United For the Separation of Church and State and the Freedom From Religion Foundation in order to help with lobbying efforts in Washington.

While I never witnessed an atheist explicitly explaining their image of what society should be in any systematic way, the social imaginary of atheists in every country I visited, as judged by survey answers concerning their moral judgments and conversations about religion and secular society, appeared to match quite closely with Charles Taylor's notion of a "system of mutual benefit." According to Taylor, a shift occurred in the social imaginaries of most Westerners in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries during which individuals began to see society serving the needs of individuals, who hold certain rights by their status as individuals, instead of a pre-existing order based in some transcendent principle such as the divine right of kings (2007). Society no longer existed to glorify a God or king but to benefit all of the individuals within it. All worked in order to benefit themselves and others and behaviour came to be judged by many according to whether it prevented the happiness or interfered with the liberty of an individual.

And indeed, the moral progressivism scores of non-theists, as measured by Haidt's scale, reveal that they care much more about preventing harm, suffering, and injustice than keeping the social group "pure" or "sanctified" or deferring to authority or demonstrating loyalty to nations. Religions are seen by many non-theists, and definitely by strong atheists, as authoritarian and oppressive to individual liberties and happiness, as they make extensive behavioural demands regarding sex and marriage, among other domains. The implication, then, is that, according to many modern Westerners, a proper society places no such demands on individuals, individuals who should not only be left to but encouraged and helped to pursue their own happiness.

When one possesses such a view of society and its purpose, it is not surprising that terrorist attacks on the United States and the conservative Islamic discourse

associated with those supporting such attacks are seen as a normative threat to this society of mutual benefit, as the purpose of such attacks is frequently interpreted as an attempt to move towards a world-wide Islamic theocracy. Likewise, when one possesses such a view of society and its purpose, it is not surprising that having members of the American religious right gaining direct access to President George W. Bush through weekly telephone conversations (Sharlet 2006) is also seen as a normative threat, as the stated goal of many on the religious right is to “redeem” the United States for Christ and to institute “biblically-based” policies.

Given that such normative threats encourage greater commitment to ideologies, it naturally follows that such threats to modern, secular society by those with religiously-based agendas encourages greater commitment to secular society in the minds and actions of those who see society as existing for the mutual benefit, liberty, and happiness of those individuals who live within it. And that is precisely what we find. We find that in the times and places when religious people attempt to institute rules based in religion but with no clear secular benefit to the happiness of individuals, such as not allowing homosexuals to marry, not allowing women to have abortions, excluding the non-religious by placing religious symbols or behaviours in public settings, more individuals feel that their vision of a modern, secular society is threatened and respond by attacking religious ideas and theocratic sentiments. In other words, in such environments, we find more strong atheism.

## Post-script

### Explaining the Patterns

I began this thesis by presenting a puzzling set of patterns. Non-theism, the lack of belief in the existence of supernatural agents, is much more common in certain nations, most notably Sweden, Norway, and Denmark than others, most notably agrarian nations such as Zimbabwe, El Salvador, as well as at least one outlying post-industrial nation, the United States. By contrast, strong atheism, the coupling of a lack of belief in supernatural agents with the normative standpoint that religious beliefs and practices are both harmful and symptomatic of a weak intellectual and moral character, is much more common in the highly religious United States than it is in the highly non-religious Scandinavian countries. Widespread atheism and significant strong atheism, then, appear to thrive in different environments. Why? The individual chapters of the thesis have attempted to answer the various elements of this question.

The sociological data provided by Norris and Inglehart (2004) and Gill and Lundsgaarde (2004) show that existential security, as measured indirectly through a host of measures of social health and equality, is a crucial driver of increased levels of non-theism in a nation, helping explain the differences we see between many poor, agrarian countries in Africa, South America, and Asia and the wealthy Scandinavian countries. The problem with their account lies not in the data but in the explanation of the data, an explanation centred on the role of religious beliefs and practices in providing “comfort” and relief from debilitating anxiety in the face of hardships. This explanation, as I explained, faces significant anthropological and psychological difficulties.

Chapters three, four, and five outlined a more cognitively responsible account of how existentially secure environments work to produce the international pattern we see in non-theism. Theism, it appears, depends on individuals receiving a sufficient exposure to CREDs regarding supernatural agent representations. Existentially secure environments, through a variety of means, reduce CREDs and thereby reduce the number of theists in a population. Further, by taking into account the additional factor of normative threat, we can better explain the puzzling difference between the wealthy but religious United States of America and the wealthy but non-religious Kingdom of Denmark. These countries more closely resemble one another economically in comparison to agrarian states, but have differed dramatically in levels of normative threat throughout their modern histories.

Chapters six, seven, and eight sought to both describe and explain an international pattern in strong atheist sentiment and activity. The number of atheist groups, the frequency of their meetings, the amount of effort individuals put into such groups, and the vociferousness of atheist discourse varies between countries and over time with the degree to which religion is seen as constituting a threat to the society of mutual benefit. Whenever religious people in the West attempt to gain social and political power in the name of religion, try to define society as religious, and attempt to enforce norms of behaviour based on religious claims, strong atheism flourishes. Chapter seven argued that the normative sentiments underlying strong atheist activity are the joint product of innate moral intuitions and socio-cultural narratives and exemplars that tap into these intuitions to produce socially-valued virtues. Chapter eight argued that the pattern we see in strong atheist activity can be partially explained by the notion of normative threat, as most atheists and secularists view modern society as having a certain “normative order,”

which Charles Taylor labels as a “system of mutual benefit” and individual liberty. When this normative order is threatened through noticeable disagreement over values, such as with those who believe society should be organized according to religious authority, or by having a leader who espouses opposing viewpoints, such as George W. Bush, or through direct attack, such as those of September 11, 2001, we see commitment to the ideology of strong atheism increase.

### The Future of Atheism

The future prospects of non-theism and strong atheism, according to the account of these phenomena given above, is very much tied to socio-cultural conditions. In opposition to traditional secularization theory, it does not appear that “modernity,” on its own, necessarily leads to widespread non-theism. Rather, widespread non-theism, as we see in Scandinavia, is the product of particular conditions of both existential and normative security. When modernity brings about such conditions, modernity produces widespread non-theism. When modernity does not bring about such conditions, as is the case in the United States, we do not see widespread non-theism. In opposition to accounts of religious beliefs and practices being somehow intrinsic to the human condition, such as Stark and Bainbridge’s rational choice theory, widespread and enduring non-theism does not appear to be impossible. Rather, religious beliefs and practices are the product of both more fixed, pan-human cognitive mechanisms and environments with higher degrees of existential and normative threat and, consequently, adequate exposure to CREDs. The future of non-theism in the West, then, is dependent on the levels of existential and normative threat.

Similarly, it appears that the future prospects of strong atheism are also tied to socio-cultural traditions. Strong atheism is dependent on a morality focused on harm/care and fairness/reciprocity at the expense of ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity, which in turn appears to be a product of modern society and the “system of mutual benefit.” It is also dependent on the strong presence of religious beliefs and demands in public life. If the Christian right, for instance, gained more political power in the United States, we would see strong atheist sentiment and activity rise to meet it. Conversely, if all religious individuals in the United States ceased to discriminate against the non-religious for both private and public sector jobs, including public office, and ceased efforts to introduce legislation declaring the United States a Christian nation or opposing behavioural practices for religious reasons, such as abortion and gay marriage, then we would see strong atheist sentiment and activity drop in the United States to more closely match Sweden and Denmark.

### The Future of this Research

Much of my account of theism and non-theism relies on the notion of credibility enhancing displays and their ability to “enhance” the credibility of supernatural agent concepts. This notion is supported by existing research in social and developmental psychology, as well as my survey results. More controlled studies demonstrating the effects of such displays would be quite valuable in confirming the effects of CREDs, whether utilizing a dependent measure of self-reports of explicit belief or, utilizing some

version of new techniques devised by social psychologists Shariff, Cohen, and Norenzayan (2008), implicit beliefs.<sup>105</sup>

Further, while I surveyed a wider range of atheists than Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006), in terms of both geographical location and level of participation in atheist organizations, my survey is by no means representative of all non-theists. Likewise, my very small snowball and self-selective sample of theists is not representative of theists. Larger, nationally representative studies would be ideal to further test my claims of the importance of CREDs and the role of social influence on the construction of moral sentiments.

In addition, one category of non-theists was largely ignored in my research, non-theists who happen to self-identify as religious, choosing to use words like “God” and “eternity” in non-supernatural ways. I would predict that these individuals witnessed fewer CREDs concerning supernatural agent concepts when growing up than did those self-identifying religious individuals, but this needs to be investigated.

And finally, my account focuses specifically on the West, and it is possible that factors specific to the West and its history are working to influence my data. One intriguing possibility for cross-cultural extensions of this research lie in India, where the vast majority of individuals are theistic but there also exist a wealth of rationalist groups and individuals, such as the Science and Rationalists’ Association of India, seeking to discredit travelling holy men and healers, who they feel prey on the superstitious thinking of the citizens of India. Another opportunity lies in Japan, where atheist and rationalist

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<sup>105</sup> Shariff and colleagues (2008) used a modified version of the Harvard Implicit Association Task, testing the association between religious words and those associated with truth, in order to see if being exposed to atheist arguments, such as those of Richard Dawkins, could actually lower implicit belief in the existence of God.

groups are quite rare and most people identify themselves as non-religious but also perform many religious practices, presenting a potential counter-example of the role of CREDS (Reader 1991).

These and other opportunities exist for furthering and refining the accounts I present in this thesis of non-theism and strong atheism. It is my hope that many of them can be pursued as we attempt to better understand the contributions of both maturationally natural cognitive mechanisms and socio-cultural contexts in the construction of our beliefs and values.

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## APPENDIX A. SURVEYS FOR NON-THEISTS

All Surveys were conducted through the use of the online survey service, Surveymonkey.com.

### Initial Survey

#### On Non-theism

##### 1. About Your Beliefs and Affiliations

While much research is done on religious belief, less is done on atheism and agnosticism.

This survey will ask you questions about your atheism, agnosticism, or similar standpoint as well as your experiences, upbringing, and friends. Some questions are multiple choice, while others will ask you to type in a few sentences or a paragraph.

Your answers to these questions will help us get a better descriptive picture of non-theism and also test numerous hypotheses about how various factors influence beliefs.

The survey attempts to be thorough; it is, therefore, somewhat long. The time it will take you to complete the survey depends on how detailed you would like to be on the open-ended questions. Some people have reported finishing in 25 minutes, while others report that it took them closer to 1 hour. If you wish to exit the survey and complete it at a later time, the software should allow this. If you have a problem, please email me at [jonathan.lanman@anthro.ox.ac.uk](mailto:jonathan.lanman@anthro.ox.ac.uk)

Thanks very much for your participation.

**1. Please indicate the label you use to identify yourself.**

<input type="checkbox"/> Atheist	<input type="checkbox"/> Religious Naturalist
<input type="checkbox"/> Non-theist	<input type="checkbox"/> Pantheist
<input type="checkbox"/> Agnostic	<input type="checkbox"/> Humanist
<input type="checkbox"/> Deist	<input type="checkbox"/> None/no label
<input type="checkbox"/> Theist	
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)	

**2. If you selected multiple labels, please indicate the label you prefer the most.**

##### 2. About Your Beliefs and Affiliations

**1. How do you define the word "atheism"?**

##### 3. About Your Beliefs and Affiliations

**1. How do you define the term "non-theism"?**

##### 4. About Your Beliefs and Affiliations

## On Non-theism

**1. How do you define the word "agnosticism"?**

## 5. About Your Beliefs and Affiliations

**1. How do you define the word "deism"?**

## 6. About Your Beliefs and Affiliations

**1. How do you define the term "religious naturalism"?**

## 7. About Your Beliefs and Affiliations

**1. How do you define the word "pantheism"?**

## 8. About Your Beliefs and Affiliations

**1. How do you define the term "humanism"?**

## 9. About Your Beliefs and Affiliations

**1. Since you listed either (Other) or (None/no label) as your choice, please describe your beliefs regarding the existence of supernatural agents such as gods and ghosts.**

## 10. About Your Beliefs and Affiliations

**1. Please describe why you feel your position (such as atheism, agnosticism, or non-theism) is the correct one.**

## 11. About Your Beliefs and Affiliations

## On Non-theism

### 1. In your mind, what is the likelihood that the following exist?

For example, if you are not certain that there is no afterlife but find it highly improbable, you might list 1% for the afterlife item. Similarly, if you have never visited the pyramids of Egypt but for the most part trust books, media, and other people, you might list 99% for the pyramids of Egypt.

	0%	1%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	99%	100%
THE AFTERLIFE	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
TRADITIONAL GOD (an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all good creator and moral enforcer)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
SOME HIGHER POWER	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
SUB-ATOMIC PARTICLES	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
GHOSTS	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
GLOBAL WARMING (meaning human use of fossil fuels is causing the temperature of the earth's atmosphere to increase)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
SOULS	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
DESTINY (Individuals being "meant" for something)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
CANCER	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
DEISTIC GOD (A divine architect of the universe who does not interfere in human affairs)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
EVOLUTION BY NATURAL SELECTION	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
ANGELS	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
ALIENS (humanoid beings with intelligence similar or superior to human intelligence)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
KARMA (a cosmic balancing scale that results in good actions being rewarded and bad actions being punished)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
THE PYRAMIDS OF EGYPT	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comments and Additions (please note if you are not sure of the meaning of an item)

## 12. About Your Beliefs and Affiliations

## On Non-theism

### 1. What is your political affiliation?

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Democrat                                 | <input type="radio"/> Liberal Democrat (UK)         |
| <input type="radio"/> Republican                               | <input type="radio"/> Conservative Party (Canada)   |
| <input type="radio"/> Independent                              | <input type="radio"/> Bloc Québécois (Canada)       |
| <input type="radio"/> None                                     | <input type="radio"/> Liberal Party (Canada)        |
| <input type="radio"/> Conservative (UK)                        | <input type="radio"/> New Democratic Party (Canada) |
| <input type="radio"/> Labour (UK)                              |   |
| <input type="radio"/> Other (please specify party and country) |   |

## 13. About Your Beliefs and Affiliations

### 1. Are you currently a member of a religious organization or congregation?

- Yes  
 No

If yes, please name the organization and tell how long you have been a member.

## 14. About Your Beliefs and Affiliations

### 1. Are you currently a member of any atheist, secularist, humanist, or similar organization at a national or local level?

- Yes  
 No

If yes, please name the organization and tell how long you have been a member.

### 2. Are you currently a member of any online organization devoted to atheism, agnosticism, or humanism?

- Yes  
 No

If yes, please name the group and tell how long you have been a member.

## On Non-theism

### 15. About Your Activities

**1. If you are a member of a non-theist organization, how frequently do you attend meetings?**

- Not applicable
- Rarely
- Once every few months
- Once a month
- A few times a month
- Once a week
- More than once a week

Comments

### 16. About Your Activities

**1. Approximately how many hours per week do you spend reading/watching/listening to non-theist media (such as books by prominent non-theists, non-theist periodicals, and non-theist websites/forums)?**

- Under 1 hour per week
- 1-3 hours per week
- 3-5 hours per week
- 5-10 hours per week
- 10-15 hours per week
- More than 15 hours per week

Comments

### 17. About Your Activities

**1. If you do visit websites/discussion boards devoted to non-theism or secularism, please list some of these websites (Please write those websites you visit most frequently first).**

## On Non-theism

### 18. About Your Activities

**1. If you admire or appreciate the work of particular non-theist authors or public figures, please list them here in approximate order of preference, including comments as you wish.**

### 19. About Your Intuitions

Some atheists and agnostics have reported that even though they do not believe in any supernatural beings or powers, they still periodically have intuitions about supernatural beings/forces being at work. For example, one atheist noted that, while in severe pain at a hospital, he felt himself asking "Why me? I have not harmed anyone," a thought which requires an unconscious belief in a force that punishes immoral behaviors. Likewise, an agnostic noted that, after walking away from a severe car accident, she felt that she must be "meant" for something in this life. The questions below will ask about whether or not you have had such intuitions and how strong you feel they are. Note that the questions are not asking if you believed and acted upon such intuitions, only if you have had them.

We realize that some of you may be reluctant to disclose that you have had intuitions that are at odds with your beliefs. Likewise, we realize that you might attempt to guess the answers we are looking for. We can only request that you give truthful answers rather than those that you think someone of your beliefs SHOULD give or those that you think we are looking for.

**1. How often, since you have held your current views, have you had the thought "Why me? I'm a good person" when you experience an unfortunate occurrence (e.g. becoming seriously ill, losing a loved one, experiencing failure, losing your job, losing a significant amount of money, having a car accident)**

- I have this thought every time such an unfortunate event occurs.
- I normally have this thought when such an unfortunate event occurs, but not always.
- I have this thought around half the times such unfortunate events occur.
- I sometimes have this thought when such an unfortunate event occurs, but not that often.
- I never have this thought when such an unfortunate event occurs.
- I have not experienced an unfortunate event since I have held my current views.

Please feel free to leave comments on this question and the paragraphs above.

### 20. About Your Intuitions

Some atheists/agnostics have reported that even though they do not believe in any supernatural beings or powers, they still periodically have intuitions about supernatural beings/forces being at work. For example, one atheist noted that, while in severe pain at a hospital, he felt himself asking "Why me? I have not harmed anyone," a thought which requires an unconscious belief in a force that punishes immoral behaviors. Likewise, an agnostic noted that, after walking away from a severe car accident, she felt that she must be "meant" for something in this life. The questions below will ask about whether or not you have had such intuitions and how strong you feel they are. Note that the questions are not asking if you believed and acted upon such intuitions, only if you have had them.

## On Non-theism

We realize that some of you may be reluctant to disclose that you have had intuitions that are at odds with your beliefs. We can only request that you give truthful answers rather than those that you think someone of your beliefs SHOULD give.

### 1. If you have had such intuitions during/after unfortunate events, please rate their average strength.

- Very weak
- Moderately weak
- Somewhat weak
- Somewhat strong
- Moderately strong
- Very strong

## 21. About Your Intuitions

Some atheists/agnostics have reported that even though they do not believe in any supernatural beings or powers, they still periodically have intuitions about supernatural beings/forces being at work. For example, one atheist noted that, while in severe pain at a hospital, he felt himself asking "Why me? I have not harmed anyone," a thought which requires an unconscious belief in a force that punishes immoral behaviors. Likewise, an agnostic noted that, after walking away from a severe car accident, she felt that she must be "meant" for something in this life. The questions below will ask about whether or not you have had such intuitions and how strong you feel they are. Note that the questions are not asking if you believed and acted upon such intuitions, only if you have had them.

We realize that some of you may be reluctant to disclose that you have had intuitions that are at odds with your beliefs. We can only request that you give truthful answers rather than those that you think someone of your beliefs SHOULD give.

### 1. If you have had such an intuition, please describe the situation in which it arose. If you have had many such intuitions, please choose one or two that you feel to be noteworthy.

## 22. About Your Intuitions

Some atheists/agnostics have reported that even though they do not believe in any supernatural beings or powers, they still periodically have intuitions about supernatural beings/forces being at work. For example, one atheist noted that, while in severe pain at a hospital, he felt himself asking "Why me? I have not harmed anyone," a thought which requires an unconscious belief in a force that punishes immoral behaviors. Likewise, an agnostic noted that, after walking away from a severe car accident, she felt that she must be "meant" for something in this life. The questions below will ask about whether or not you have had such intuitions and how strong you feel they are. Note that the questions are not asking if you believed and acted upon such intuitions, only if you have had them.

We realize that some of you may be reluctant to disclose that you have had intuitions that are at odds with your beliefs. We can only request that you give truthful answers rather than those that you think someone of your beliefs SHOULD give.

## On Non-theism

**1. How often, since you have held your current views, have you had the thought, "Wow, I must be a good person" or "I must be meant for something" or "Someone must like me" when experiencing good fortune or avoiding a serious misfortune (e.g. winning a lottery-like contest, avoiding injury in an accident, avoiding an accident that would have caused injury)?**

- I have this thought every time such a fortunate event occurs.
- I normally have this thought when such a fortunate event occurs, but not always.
- I have this thought on approximate half of the occasions such fortunate events occur.
- I sometimes have this thought when such a fortunate event occurs, but not that often.
- I never have this thought when such a fortunate event occurs.
- I have not experienced a fortunate event since I have held my current views.

## 23. About Your Intuitions

Some atheists/agnostics have reported that even though they do not believe in any supernatural beings or powers, they still periodically have intuitions about supernatural beings/forces being at work. For example, one atheist noted that, while in severe pain at a hospital, he felt himself asking "Why me? I have not harmed anyone," a thought which requires an unconscious belief in a force that punishes immoral behaviors. Likewise, an agnostic noted that, after walking away from a severe car accident, she felt that she must be "meant" for something in this life. The questions below will ask about whether or not you have had such intuitions and how strong you feel they are. Note that the questions are not asking if you believed and acted upon such intuitions, only if you have had them.

We realize that some of you may be reluctant to disclose that you have had intuitions that are at odds with your beliefs. We can only request that you give truthful answers rather than those that you think someone of your beliefs SHOULD give.

**1. If you have had such intuitions during/after a fortunate event, please rate their average strength.**

- Very weak
- Moderately weak
- Somewhat weak
- Somewhat strong
- Moderately strong
- Very strong

## 24. About Your Intuitions

Some atheists/agnostics have reported that even though they do not believe in any supernatural beings or powers, they still periodically have intuitions about supernatural beings/forces being at work. For example, one atheist noted that, while in severe pain at a hospital, he felt himself asking "Why me? I have not harmed anyone," a thought which requires an unconscious belief in a force that punishes immoral behaviors. Likewise, an agnostic noted that, after walking away from a severe car accident, she felt that she must be "meant" for something in this life. The questions below will ask about whether or not you have had such intuitions and how strong you feel they are. Note that the questions are not asking if you believed and acted upon such intuitions, only if you have had them.

## On Non-theism

We realize that some of you may be reluctant to disclose that you have had intuitions that are at odds with your beliefs. We can only request that you give truthful answers rather than those that you think someone of your beliefs SHOULD give.

**1. If you have had such an intuition, please describe the situation in which it arose. If you have had many such intuitions, please choose one that you feel to be noteworthy.**

## 25. About Your Intuitions

Some atheists/agnostics have reported that even though they do not believe in any supernatural beings or powers, they still periodically have intuitions about supernatural beings/forces being at work. For example, one atheist noted that, while in severe pain at a hospital, he felt himself asking "Why me? I have not harmed anyone," a thought which requires an unconscious belief in a force that punishes immoral behaviors. Likewise, an agnostic noted that, after walking away from a severe car accident, she felt that she must be "meant" for something in this life. The questions below will ask about whether or not you have had such intuitions and how strong you feel they are. Note that the questions are not asking if you believed and acted upon such intuitions, only if you have had them.

We realize that some of you may be reluctant to disclose that you have had intuitions that are at odds with your beliefs. We can only request that you give truthful answers rather than those that you think someone of your beliefs SHOULD give.

**1. How often, since you have held your current views, have you had intuitions that some event was meant as a "sign?" Such signs might include those of warning, approval, or comfort.**

- I constantly have such intuitions
- I have such intuitions with great frequency
- I have such intuitions with some degree of frequency
- I have such intuitions, but only once in a while
- I rarely have such intuitions
- I have never had such an intuition since I have held my current views.

## 26. About Your Intuitions

Some atheists/agnostics have reported that even though they do not believe in any supernatural beings or powers, they still periodically have intuitions about supernatural beings/forces being at work. For example, one atheist noted that, while in severe pain at a hospital, he felt himself asking "Why me? I have not harmed anyone," a thought which requires an unconscious belief in a force that punishes immoral behaviors. Likewise, an agnostic noted that, after walking away from a severe car accident, she felt that she must be "meant" for something in this life. The questions below will ask about whether or not you have had such intuitions and how strong you feel they are. Note that the questions are not asking if you believed and acted upon such intuitions, only if you have had them.

We realize that some of you may be reluctant to disclose that you have had intuitions that are at odds with your beliefs. We can only request that you give truthful answers rather than those that you think someone of your beliefs SHOULD give.

## On Non-theism

**1. If you have had such intuitions of events being signs, please rate the average strength of these intuitions.**

- Very weak
- Moderately weak
- Somewhat weak
- Somewhat strong
- Moderately strong
- Very strong

### 27. About Your Intuitions

Some atheists/agnostics have reported that even though they do not believe in any supernatural beings or powers, they still periodically have intuitions about supernatural beings/forces being at work. For example, one atheist noted that, while in severe pain at a hospital, he felt himself asking "Why me? I have not harmed anyone," a thought which requires an unconscious belief in a force that punishes immoral behaviors. Likewise, an agnostic noted that, after walking away from a severe car accident, she felt that she must be "meant" for something in this life. The questions below will ask about whether or not you have had such intuitions and how strong you feel they are. Note that the questions are not asking if you believed and acted upon such intuitions, only if you have had them.

We realize that some of you may be reluctant to disclose that you have had intuitions that are at odds with your beliefs. We can only request that you give truthful answers rather than those that you think someone of your beliefs SHOULD give.

**1. If you have had such an intuition, please describe the situation in which it arose. If you have had many such intuitions, please choose one that you feel to be noteworthy.**

### 28. About Your Becoming an Atheist/Agnostic/Non-theist

**1. How old were you when you first realized that you had no belief in the existence of God or gods?**

### 29. About Your Becoming an Atheist/Agnostic/Non-theist

**1. Please describe how you came to be a non-theist? If you feel you have always been a non-theist, please indicate this.**

### 30. About Your Becoming an Atheist/Agnostic/Non-theist

## On Non-theism

### 1. What description best characterizes your move to atheism/agnosticism?

- Not Applicable
- A natural process that I did not really need to think that much about
- An intellectual struggle to figure out what I should believe
- Other (please specify)

## 31. About Your Becoming an Atheist/Agnostic/Non-theist

### 1. What setting were you in when you were becoming a non-theist (e.g. living at home, at college)?

Leave blank if you have always been a non-theist.

## 32. About Your Becoming an Atheist/Agnostic/Non-theist

### 1. Whom were you most associating with when you were in the process of becoming a non-theist (e.g. family, school friends, church friends, teachers)?

Leave blank if you have always been a non-theist.

## 33. About Your Non-theism

## On Non-theism

**1. Some non-theists argue that religious beliefs are not only false but also dangerous and oppressive. They argue that the world would be better off without religion.**

**Other non-theists, while agreeing that religious beliefs are false, view religion as neutral or even as a positive and beneficial force in the world. They argue that getting rid of all religious beliefs would do little good and would potentially do great harm.**

**Do you view religious belief as a positive, neutral, or negative force in the world?**

	-5 Very negative force	-4	-3	-2	-1	0 Neutral force	1	2	3	4	5 Very positive force
Religious belief in general	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Liberal religion (non-literal, non-fundamentalist)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Judaism	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Islam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Belief in God/gods without being affiliated to a particular religion	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Christianity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Further comments

## 34. About Your Becoming an Atheist/Agnostic

## On Non-theism

**1. Some non-theists report morally rejecting religion prior to intellectually rejecting it. For example, one atheist who was raised religious rejected the Christian God as oppressive and authoritarian at 13. It was not until age 16 that she became convinced that Christian beliefs, and all other supernatural beliefs, were factually wrong.**

**Other non-theists report that their moral rejection of religious beliefs came after their intellectual rejection.**

**Did you have moral objections to religious beliefs or religious people before you came to think that religious beliefs were most likely wrong?**

- Not applicable
- Moral rejection first
- Moral & intellectual rejection simultaneously
- Intellectual rejection first

Further comments

## 35. About Your Becoming an Atheist/Agnostic

**1. If you did have moral objections prior to having intellectual rejection, how important do you think your moral rejection was in leading you to become a non-theist?**

- Not important at all
- Somewhat important
- Moderately important
- Very important

Further comments

## 36. About Your Becoming an Atheist/Agnostic/Non-theist

## On Non-theism

**1. In your moral rejection of religion, how immoral did you find the following? (Please note that you cannot use the same rating for more than one item).**

	0= Not immoral at all	1	2	3	4	5= Moderately immoral	6	7	8	9	10= Extremely immoral
Specific doctrines about God/gods (ex. original sin, homophobia, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The behavior of religious people	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
God or gods (in terms of how you thought God was affecting your life, such as through causing you or others to suffer)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Further comments

## 37. About Your Becoming an Atheist/Agnostic/Non-theist

**1. Do your friends and family know of your non-theism?**

- Yes
- No
- Some do know; some do not

Please provide details.

## 38. About Your Becoming an Atheist/Agnostic/Non-theist

**1. Please rate, on scale from 0 to 10, how consequential it WOULD BE for you IF your non-theism became known to your friends/family.**

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
If it became known to friends and peers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If it became known to family members	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## 39. About Your Becoming an Atheist/Agnostic/Non-theist

## On Non-theism

**1. Please rate, on scale from 0 to 10, how consequential it was for you when your non-theism became known to your friends and family.**

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
When my non-theism became known to my friends/peers.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When my non-theism became known to my family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please provide details of any consequences of your atheism/agnosticism.

## 40. About Your Becoming an Atheist/Agnostic/Non-theist

**1. Please rate, on scale from 0 to 10, how consequential it WOULD HAVE BEEN for you to come out as an atheist/agnostic at age 12-15.**

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
If my friends/peers had known	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If my parents/family had known	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please describe what you think the consequences might have been.

## 41. About Your Becoming an Atheist/Agnostic/Non-theist

**1. Was there a time in your life during which you did believe in a traditional God?**

- Yes  
 No

If yes, please provide details, especially your age during this period.

## 42. About You

**1. How old are you?**

## 43. About You

## On Non-theism

### 1. Sex

- Female  
 Male

## 44. About You

### 1. Marital Status

- Single  
 Married  
 Divorced  
 Widowed  
 Unmarried but with long term partner  
 Other (please specify)

## 45. About You

### 1. Do you have children?

- Yes  
 No

## 46. About You

### 1. If you do have children, how many children do you have?

## 47. About You

## On Non-theism

### 1. Ethnic Origin

- African, Black, African American
- Native American, Alaska Native
- White or Caucasian
- Asian (including Indian subcontinent)
- Asian American
- Hispanic, Latino
- Mexican American, Chicano
- Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander
- Puerto Rican
- Other (please specify)

### 48. About You

**1. In what country (countries) are you a citizen? If you are a citizen of multiple countries, please indicate which affiliation you feel to be primary.**

### 49. About You

**1. In what city/town, state/province, and country do you presently live?**

### 50. About You

## On Non-theism

**1. What is the approximate annual income of your household? In the comment box, please indicate currency (American dollars, Canadian dollars, Australian dollars, British pounds, Euros).**

Less than 18,000

18,001-25,000

25,001-35,000

35,001-50,000

50,001-75,000

75,001-100,000

100,001-250,000

Over 250,000

Comment

## 51. About Your Upbringing

**1. In what religion (if any) were you raised? (e.g. Catholic Christianity, Church of England, Judaism, Islam, Lakota, Buddhism, no religion)**

## 52. About Your Upbringing

## On Non-theism

**1. To what extent did you have a "religious upbringing?" That is, to what extent, adding it all up, did the important people in your life—such as your parents, teachers, and church officials (if any)—do the following as you were growing up?**

	0=To no extent at all	1=To a slight extent	2=To a mild extent	3=To a moderate extent	4=To an appreciable extent	5=To a considerable extent	6=To a great extent
Emphasize regularly attending religious services?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Discuss world events in terms of religion (in particular how God/ancestors/spirits would view certain events or actions)?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Emphasize that you should read scriptures or other religious materials?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Emphasize attending special religious services (e.g. Christmas, Easter, Yom Kippur)?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Make it clear it would be a very bad thing to leave your religion?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Disapprove of your having friends who were non-religious?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Review the teachings of a religion at home?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Emphasize that people will be rewarded or punished, IN THIS LIFE, for their actions?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Discuss moral dos and don'ts in religious terms?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Emphasize making religion an important part of your life?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Emphasize that there is a spiritual plan or purpose for your life?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Emphasize that people will be rewarded or punished for their actions IN AN AFTERLIFE OR FUTURE LIFE?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you pray before bedtime?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Encourage you to pray for guidance?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you pray before meals?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Teach you to strictly obey the religion's commandments?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Teach you to obey representatives of the divine (e.g. pastors,	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## On Non-theism

priests, rabbis)?

Teach you that your religion was the truest religion?

Disapprove of you watching certain television programs or movies because of their being "evil" or "ungodly"?

Further comments on these items.

### 53. Non-theist upbringing

While the previous page asked you to rate your religious upbringing, this page will ask you to rate your atheist/agnostic and scientific upbringing.

**1. To what extent did the important people in your life emphasize the following as you were growing up.**

	0= To no extent at all	1	2	3= To a moderate extent	4	5	6= To a great extent
Teaching you that religious claims are false	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Teaching you to question authority	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Teaching you to take an interest in the natural world	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Teaching you that people in other cultures live differently	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Teaching you to use reason to solve problems	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Further comments

### 54. About Your Upbringing

**1. Were you ever forced against your will to participate in religious activities (e.g. going to church, lighting candles, praying)?**

Yes

No

### 55. About Your Upbringing

## On Non-theism

### 1. If you were ever forced to participate, how often did this occur?

- Daily
- A few times a week
- A few times a month
- Once a month
- A few times a year
- Rarely
- I was never forced to participate

## 56. About Your Upbringing

### 1. For how long did this situation last?

- It was an isolated incident
- For a few weeks or months
- For about a year
- For a few years
- For most of my childhood and adolescence

Other (please specify)

## 57. About Your Upbringing

### 1. How old were you during this period?

## 58. About Your Upbringing

## On Non-theism

**1. How concerned were you as you grew up about being the victim of some type of physical violence (e.g. bullying, corporal punishment, abuse, gangs)?**

- Not concerned at all
- Slightly or infrequently concerned
- Moderately concerned
- Significantly/frequently concerned
- Constantly concerned

Only if you feel comfortable doing so, please describe any concerns you had with physical violence as you were growing up.

## 59. About Your Upbringing

**1. How would you describe the environment in which you grew up?**

- Rural
- Suburban
- Urban
- Other (please specify)

## 60. About Your Upbringing

**1. If you can and feel comfortable doing so, please list the names of the towns/cities, plus states/provinces of the places you have lived and for how long.**

## 61. About Your Upbringing

## On Non-theism

**1. How often as you grew up did you experience the “outdoors” or “wilderness,” through such activities as camping, hiking, canoeing, walking in the woods, hunting, and fishing?**

- Rarely or never
- Once every few years
- Once a year
- Several times a year
- Several times a month
- Several times a week
- Constantly

Comments:

## 62. About Your Upbringing

**1. How would you rate the level of RACIAL/ETHNIC diversity within the community in which you grew up?**

- Very diverse
- Moderately diverse
- Somewhat diverse
- Somewhat homogenous
- Moderately homogenous
- Very homogenous

Please give details:

## 63. About Your Upbringing

## On Non-theism

**1. How would you rate the level of RELIGIOUS diversity within the community in which you grew up?**

- Very diverse
- Moderately diverse
- Somewhat diverse
- Somewhat homogenous
- Moderately homogenous
- Very homogenous

Please give details.

## 64. About Your Upbringing

**1. To your knowledge, approximately what percentage of your friends were agnostic or atheist when you were the following ages?**

	Less than 10%	10%-25%	26%-50%	51%-75%	76%-100%
When you were 12 years of age	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When you were 18 years of age	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Presently	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## 65. About Your Parents

**1. Are both of your parents still alive?**

- Yes
- No

If no, please indicate how old you were when he/she/they died and, only if you are comfortable doing so, describe the circumstances of his/her/their death.

## 66. About Your Parents

## On Non-theism

**1. Please describe what you know or suspect about the religious beliefs of your mother and father. If you've had little/no contact with your parents, please describe the religious beliefs of your guardian(s).**

### 67. About Your Parents

**1. Were your parents ever divorced?**

Yes

No

If yes, how old were you when they divorced?

### 68. About Your Parents

**1. What were your parents/guardians' occupations as you grew up?**

### 69. About Your Parents

## On Non-theism

**1. In TODAY'S MONEY, what was the approximate annual income of your household as you were growing up? In the comment box, please indicate the proper currency (American dollars, Canadian dollars, Australian dollars, British pounds, Euros).**

- Less than 1000
- 1000-2,500
- 2,501-5,000
- 5,001-7,500
- 7,501-10,000
- 10,001-15,000
- 15,001-20,000
- 20,001-25,000
- 25,001-35,000
- 35,001-50,000
- 50,001-75,000
- 75,001-100,000
- 100,000-250,000
- 250,001-350,000
- 350,001-500,000
- Over 500,000

Currency used

## 70. About Your Parents

**1. How did you feel your household's income compared to the majority of households you routinely associated with (neighbors, church friends, others from your school)?**

- We had significantly less money than most of the households we associated with.
- We had less money than most other households we associated with but not significantly so.
- We had around the same amount of money as most other households we associated with.
- We had more money than most other households we associated with but not significantly so.
- We had significantly more money than most other households we associated with.
- Other (please specify)

## On Non-theism

### 71. About Your Parents

#### 1. What is the highest level of education your MOTHER has completed?

- Middle School
- High School
- Associate's degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Postgraduate degree
- Other (please specify)

### 72. About Your Parents

#### 1. What is the highest level of education your FATHER has completed?

- Middle School
- High School
- Associate's degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Postgraduate degree
- Other (please specify)

### 73. About Your Education

#### 1. Did you attend a religious school?

- Yes
- No

If yes, please give details as to the type of school and the dates you attended.

### 74. About Your Education

## On Non-theism

1. Have you graduated from high school?

Yes

No

### 75. About Your Education

1. What was your high school result?

If from the US or Canada, please give your high school grade point average (e.g. 3.5/4.0). If from the UK, please list your A-levels and the grades you received for them. If from Australia, please give your score on the HSC.

### 76. About Your Education

1. At approximately what age, if at all, did you first learn Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection?

### 77. About Your Education

1. In what setting did you first learn Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection? (e.g. home, school, church, independent study)

### 78. About Your Education

1. Have you attended a university or college?

Yes

No

### 79. About Your Education

1. Did you participate in any religious organizations during college?

Yes

No

If yes, please describe.

### 80. About Your Education

## On Non-theism

**1. Did you participate in any atheist, secularist, skeptic, or like-minded organizations in college?**

- Yes  
 No

If yes, please describe.

### 81. About Your Education

**1. What is the highest level of education YOU have completed?**

- Middle school  
 High School  
 Associate's Degree  
 Bachelor's degree  
 Postgraduate degree  
 Other (please specify)

### 82. Further Comments

**1. Please use this space as you wish. You might comment on the survey as a whole or on particular questions. You might also relate something you feel to be important about your non-theism that you have not had a chance to discuss to this point in the survey.**

### 83. Contact Information

Your answers to this point have been completely anonymous and are much appreciated.

## On Non-theism

**1. Now, only if you are comfortable with a researcher contacting you to ask a few further questions about some of your responses, please provide your name and email address.**

**If you do not wish a researcher to contact you, please leave this comment box blank.**

## Follow-up Survey for Non-theists

This survey was sent to those individuals who, after completed the first survey, left their email address and permission for me to contact them again with additional questions.

<b>Non-theism follow-up ver2</b>
<b>1. Welcome back!</b>
<p>Thanks to all of you for participating in the survey.</p> <p>As I examined the preliminary results of the first part of the survey and talked with many non-theists, I realized that a few other questions are quite relevant in understanding non-theism.</p> <p>This set of questions is shorter than the last. Having said that, I have added the ability to leave this set of questions and reenter it at a later time, in case you do not wish to answer all the questions in one sitting.</p> <p>Thanks so much for your continued participation and I look forward to sharing my results with you when the project is completed.</p> <p>Jonathan A. Lanman DPhil Student Centre for Anthropology and Mind Institute of Cognitive &amp; Evolutionary Anthropology University of Oxford</p>
<b>2. E-mail confirmation</b>
<p><b>1. In order to properly match up your answers on these questions with those you gave on the earlier survey questions, please write in your e-mail address here (please use the same e-mail address you gave on the previous survey).</b></p> <input type="text"/>
<b>3. Non-theism and Morality</b>

## Non-theism follow-up ver2

**1. Part 1. When you decide whether something is right or wrong, to what extent are the following considerations relevant to your thinking? Please rate each statement using this scale:**

**[0] = not at all relevant (This consideration has nothing to do with my judgments of right and wrong)**

**[1] = not very relevant**

**[2] = slightly relevant**

**[3] = somewhat relevant**

**[4] = very relevant**

**[5] = extremely relevant (This is one of the most important factors when I judge right and wrong)**

	0= not at all relevant	1= not very relevant	2= slightly relevant	3= somewhat relevant	4= very relevant	5= extremely relevant
Whether or not someone suffered emotionally	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Whether or not some people were treated differently than others	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Whether or not someone's action showed love for his or her country	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Whether or not someone showed a lack of respect for authority	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Whether or not someone violated standards of purity and decency	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Whether or not someone was good at math	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Whether or not someone cared for someone weak or vulnerable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Whether or not someone acted unfairly	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Whether or not someone did something to betray his or her group	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Whether or not someone conformed to the traditions of society	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Whether or not someone did something disgusting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Further comments

## 4. Non-theism and Morality

## Non-theism follow-up ver2

**1. Part 2. Please read the following sentences and indicate your agreement or disagreement:**

	0= Strongly disagree	1= Moderately disagree	2= Slightly disagree	3= Slightly agree	4= Moderately agree	5= Strongly agree
Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When the government makes laws, the number one principle should be ensuring that everyone is treated fairly.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am proud of my country's history.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Respect for authority is something all children need to learn.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
People should not do things that are disgusting, even if no one is harmed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It is better to do good than to do bad.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Justice is the most important requirement for a society.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
People should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Men and women each have different roles to play in society.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comments

## 5. Moral upbringing

Parents emphasize different values in the moral upbringing of their children. Some emphasize community/group responsibility while others emphasize individuality. Some emphasize obedience to authority while others emphasize equality.

The following questions will ask you what values your parents emphasized as you were growing up.

## Non-theism follow-up ver2

### 1. To what extent did your parents emphasize the importance of compassion and empathy?

0= To no extent at all    1    2    3= To a moderate extent    4    5    6= To a great extent

Compassion/Empathy                           

Comments and/or specific instances

### 2. To what extent did your parents emphasize the importance of authority?

0= To no extent at all    1    2    3= To a moderate extent    4    5    6= To a great extent

Authority                           

Comments and/or specific instances

### 3. To what extent did your parents encourage you to be patriotic about your country?

0= To no extent at all    1    2    3= To a moderate extent    4    5    6= To a great extent

Patriotism                           

Comments and/or specific instances

### 4. Some parents emphasize the authority they have over their children while others try to minimize this authority and make their children feel like equals in decision-making.

#### Please rate your parents on authority vs. equality in the household.

Very authoritarian    Moderately authoritarian    Somewhat authoritarian    Somewhat egalitarian    Moderately egalitarian    Very egalitarian

Authority vs. Equality                       

Comments and/or specific instances

## Non-theism follow-up ver2

**5. To what extent did your parents emphasize the importance of fairness and justice for all people (regardless of race, class, and religion)?**

	0= To no extent at all	1	2	3= To a moderate extent	4	5	6= To a great extent
Fairness and Justice:	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Comments and/or specific instances							
<input type="text"/>							

**6. To what extent did your parents emphasize that the sexual (e.g. homosexuality) or dietary (e.g. killing and eating sheep in one's back garden) practices of others were "disgusting"?**

	0= To no extent at all	1	2	3= To a moderate extent	4	5	6= To a great extent
Sexual/dietary disgust	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Comments and/or specific instances							
<input type="text"/>							

## 6. About Your Beliefs

**1. In your mind, what is the likelihood that the following exist?**

**For example, if you are not certain that there is no such thing as free will but find it highly improbable, you might list 1% for the free will item.**

	0%	1%	5%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	99%	100%
Free will (the ability of a person to make free choices; this entails the belief that our actions are not determined by the combination of genetic and environmental factors)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Telepathy (Communication through means other than the five traditional senses)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Quarks	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Multiple universes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Comments														
<input type="text"/>														

## 7. Displays of Commitment

## Non-theism follow-up ver2

### 1. Did at least one of your parents believe in the existence of God/gods/supernatural forces?

- Yes  
 No

## 8. Displays of Commitment

Religious believers demonstrate different degrees of commitment to their beliefs. Some show strong commitment by frequently attending religious meetings, praying, showing emotion in religious settings, giving money or time to religious organizations, fasting, or participating in public displays such as baptism, reconciliation, or religious healing.

Others have religious beliefs but do not engage in these activities or engage in them to a much lesser extent.

The following questions are about your BELIEVING parent(s). If only one parent is a believer, answer for that person; do not average the believer and the non-believer together.

### 1. How frequently did your parent(s) attend religious services or meetings?

0= Not at all      1      2      3= Moderately frequently      4      5      6= Very frequently

Attending services or meetings                                         

Comments

### 2. How frequently did you witness your parent(s) praying, such as at meals or family activities?

0= Not at all      1      2      3= Moderately frequently      4      5      6= Very frequently

Parental prayer                                         

Comments

### 3. Did your parent(s) fast or make other sacrifices for religious reasons?

- Yes  
 No

## Non-theism follow-up ver2

### 4. If yes, did your parent(s) follow through with their fasting/sacrifices?

- Always  
 Mostly  
 Sometimes  
 Rarely  
 Never

Comments

### 5. Please rate the amount/percentage of income your parent(s) gave to religious organizations and religious charities.

	0= None	1	2	3= A moderate amount/percentage	4	5	6= A great amount/percentage
Amount given	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comments

### 6. To what extent did your parent(s) participate in religious charity work or religious teaching (such as Sunday school)?

	0= To no extent at all	1	2	3= To a moderate extent	4	5	6= To a great extent
Religious charity work and religious teaching	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comments

### 7. Did your parents participate in public displays of commitment such as baptism, reconciliation, or religious healing ceremonies?

- Yes  
 No

If yes, please describe

## Non-theism follow-up ver2

**8. To what extent did your parent(s) bring up religion in public outside of religious settings (e.g. telling people whom they have just met that Jesus loves them or that Allah is watching)?**

0= To no extent at all    1    2    3= To a moderate extent    4    5    6= To a great extent

Bringing up religion                           

Comments

**9. To what extent did your parent(s) display emotion (e.g. elation, sadness) in response to religious ideas or in religious services?**

0= To no extent at all    1    2    3= To a moderate extent    4    5    6= To a great extent

Display emotion                           

Comments

**10. Did your parent(s) ever experience altered states of consciousness such as speaking in tongues, trance states, or possession?**

- Yes  
 No

If yes, please describe and indicate approximately how often this happened.

**11. Please use this space to describe any other displays of commitment not covered by these questions.**

## 9. Displays of Commitment

Religious believers demonstrate different degrees of commitment to their beliefs. Some show strong commitment by frequently attending religious meetings, praying, showing emotion in religious settings, giving money or time to religious organizations, fasting, or participating in public displays such as baptism, reconciliation, or religious healing.

Others have religious beliefs but do not engage in these activities or engage in them to a much lesser extent.

## Non-theism follow-up ver2

**1. Did you attend or participate in any churches, religious organizations, or camps while you were growing up?**

- Yes  
 No

### 10. Displays of Commitment

Religious believers demonstrate different degrees of commitment to their beliefs. Some show strong commitment by frequently attending religious meetings, praying, showing emotion in religious settings, giving money or time to religious organizations, fasting, or participating in public displays such as baptism, reconciliation, or religious healing.

Others have religious beliefs but do not engage in these activities or engage in them to a much lesser extent.

**1. You will have the ability to answer the following questions for 2 different organizations.**

**Please name the first organization/church/camp.**

**2. Did the leaders of this organization/congregation/camp make sacrifices to the religion, such as celibacy, fasting, funding activities with their own money?**

- Yes  
 No

If yes, please describe

**3. To what extent did group members engage in charitable work together?**

	0= To no extent	1	2	3= To a moderate extent	4	5	6= To a great extent
Collaborative charitable work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comments

**4. To what extent did members of this organization/congregation/camp show emotion (e.g. elation, sadness) in services/meetings?**

	0= To no extent at all	1	2	3= To a moderate extent	4	5	6= To a great extent
Showing emotion	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comments

## Non-theism follow-up ver2

**5. To what extent did members of this organization/congregation behave as if they were engaged in altered states of consciousness such as speaking in tongues, trance, or possession?**

0= To no extent at all      1      2      3= To a moderate extent      4      5      6= To a great extent

Altered states

Comments

**6. Please use this space to describe any other displays of commitment in which members of this group participated.**

**7. Did you participate in another religious organization, church, or camp?**

- Yes  
 No

## 11. Displays of Commitment

Religious believers demonstrate different degrees of commitment to their beliefs. Some show strong commitment by frequently attending religious meetings, praying, showing emotion in religious settings, giving money or time to religious organizations, fasting, or participating in public displays such as baptism, reconciliation, or religious healing.

Others have religious beliefs but do not engage in these activities or engage in them to a much lesser extent.

**1. Please name this second organization/church/camp.**

**2. Did the leaders of this organization/congregation/camp make sacrifices to the religion, such as celibacy, fasting, funding activities with their own money?**

- Yes  
 No

If yes, please describe

## Non-theism follow-up ver2

### 3. To what extent did group members engage in charitable work together?

0= To no extent      1      2      3= To a moderate extent      4      5      6= To a great extent

Collaborative charitable work                                         

Comments

### 4. To what extent did members of this organization/congregation/camp show emotion (e.g. elation, sadness) in services/meetings?

0= To no extent at all      1      2      3= To a moderate extent      4      5      6= To a great extent

Showing emotion                                         

Comments

### 5. To what extent did members of this organization/congregation behave as if they were engaged in altered states of consciousness such as speaking in tongues, trance, or possession?

0= To no extent at all      1      2      3= To a moderate extent      4      5      6= To a great extent

Altered states                                         

Comments

### 6. Please use this space to describe any other displays of commitment in which members of this group participated.

## 12. Community support

Historians and observers of religion frequently point out that religious groups provide support for their members by providing food, shelter, and other resources in times of need.

Since the industrial revolution, fewer people in industrialized countries rely on religious groups for this support. They may rely on the social welfare policies of their governments or on the generosity of family and close friends if they fall on hard times.

People who do not have access to social welfare benefits or the generosity of family and friends, however, are much more vulnerable to homelessness, serious illness, and starvation and normally have shorter life expectancies.

## Non-theism follow-up ver2

**1. How vulnerable would you (and any children you may have) be to homelessness, serious illness, and starvation if you lost your job or your present sources of income?**

- Not vulnerable at all
- Slightly vulnerable
- Somewhat vulnerable
- Moderately vulnerable
- Significantly vulnerable
- Extremely vulnerable

**2. If you do not feel very vulnerable, what gives you your feeling of security (e.g. family members or a close-knit group of friends whom you feel confident would support you, a government or religious group with strong assistance programs, a religious group, a large personal fortune)?**

**If you do feel vulnerable, what particular concerns would you have in a time of need (e.g. health care costs, rent, providing for kids)?**

**3. Further comments about questions on this page.**

## 13. Comments

Similarly to the last survey, if you have any comments on the survey as a whole, specific questions, or would just like to say something you haven't had a chance to thusfar, please feel free to share.

**1. Comments**

# APPENDIX B. SURVEYS FOR THEISTS

All Surveys were conducted through the use of the online survey service, Surveymonkey.com.

## Initial Survey

<b>Views on atheism and agnosticism</b>
<b>1. Welcome</b>
<p>Thanks very much for participating in this survey.</p> <p>While much scholarly work is done on different religions, much less work is done on atheism, agnosticism, and other similar views.</p> <p>We hope that this survey will give us a better idea of how people from a variety of religious perspectives view atheism and agnosticism.</p> <p>This survey will ask various questions about how you view atheism and agnosticism. It will also ask questions about you and your own beliefs, which will allow us to see how people with different beliefs and from different backgrounds view atheism and agnosticism.</p> <p>Some of the questions are multiple choice, while others are more open-ended and will ask you to type in a few sentences or a paragraph.</p> <p>Since you know you are being surveyed as someone from a religious perspective, you might feel pressure to answer as you think someone from a certain religious background SHOULD answer rather than what you honestly think.</p> <p>In addition, there is also the pressure you might feel to answer in a way you think the researcher wants you to answer.</p> <p>Please be assured that we are not looking for any particular answers to the questions, only that you answer honestly. The survey is anonymous, though you will be asked at the end of the survey if you are willing to waive your anonymity so that a researcher might contact you via email to ask a few more questions based on your answers.</p> <p>The survey attempts to be thorough, so it will take some time. If you wish to stop and come back to the survey later, the software should allow this. If it does not, please contact me at jonathan.lanman@anthro.ox.ac.uk</p> <p>Thanks again for participating.</p>
<b>2. Terminology</b>
<p><b>1. What does the word "atheism" mean to you?</b></p> <input type="text"/>
<b>3. Terminology</b>
<p><b>1. What does the word "agnosticism" mean to you?</b></p> <input type="text"/>
<b>4. Terminology</b>
<p>Thanks very much for letting us know how you define the words "atheism" and "agnosticism."</p> <p>This page is designed to let you know the definitions of these words that will be used for the rest of the survey.</p> <p><b>ATHEISM</b> Believing that no God or gods exist.</p> <p><b>AGNOSTICISM</b> Neither believing in nor denying the existence of God or gods. This position is usually linked with the belief that we can never know whether God or gods exist.</p>

## Views on atheism and agnosticism

### GOD

This word can be and has been used in a multitude of ways. Here, we will limit the word "God" to two meanings.

1) TRADITIONAL GOD: An all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing being who created the universe and enforces morality through rewards and punishments.

2) DEISTIC GOD: A divine architect of the universe who created everything but does not intervene in the workings of that creation.

### GODS

While a variety of definitions of "gods" is possible, here it will be used to designate not only supernatural agents from all polytheistic traditions, but also spirits of nature and ancestors.

## 5. People you know.

### 1. Do you know anyone who calls him or herself an atheist or agnostic?

Yes

No

## 6. People you know.

This section will ask you about someone you know who self-identifies as an atheist or an agnostic.

### 1. Is this person male or female?

Male

Female

### 2. Approximately how old is this person?

### 3. What is this person's relationship to you? How do you know this person?

### 4. What is your overall opinion of this person (not just this person's unbelief)? What do you think about him/her?

## 7. People you know.

### 1. Approximately how many people do you know in total who call themselves atheists or agnostics?

## 8. People you know.

## Views on atheism and agnosticism

**1. Do you suspect someone in your family or circle of friends of secretly being an atheist or agnostic?**

- Yes  
 No

Please give details about such people and why you suspect them of being atheists/agnostics.

## 9. People you know.

**1. Would you tell your friends and family if you lost your belief in the existence of God?**

- Yes  
 No

Why or why not?

## 10. Your views of atheism and agnosticism

**1. Have you ever thought of yourself as an atheist or agnostic?**

- Yes  
 No

If yes, please describe how you came to that position and also how you left it.

## 11. Your views of atheism and agnosticism

**1. In general, do you believe people who claim to be atheists or agnostics are sincere, or do you think that they secretly believe that God or gods exist?**

- I believe that self-proclaimed atheists and agnostics are sincere in their atheism/agnosticism.  
 I believe that self-proclaimed atheists and agnostics secretly believe that God or gods exist.

Further comments.

## 12. Views of atheism and agnosticism

### Views on atheism and agnosticism

**1. Why do you think atheists and agnostics hold the beliefs that they do? What might lead someone to be an atheist or agnostic?**

### 13. Views of atheism and agnosticism

**1. Do you think it is possible for an atheist to be a good person?**

Yes

No

Comments:

### 14. Views of atheism and agnosticism

**1. Do you think that atheists and agnostics can be loyal citizens of your country?**

Yes

No

Further comments:

### 15. Views of atheism and agnosticism

**1. What do you think the consequences would be if everyone became an atheist or agnostic?**

### 16. Views of atheism and agnosticism

## Views on atheism and agnosticism

1. On a scale from 1-10, how dangerous do you think the following are to society?

	1= Not dangerous at all	2	3	4	5= Somewhat dangerous	6	7	8	9	10= Extremely dangerous
Atheism/Agnosticism	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Illegal Immigration	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Corporations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Religious Extremism	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Homosexuality	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Environmental Activism	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Conservative Christianity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Conservative Islam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Further comments.

## 17. Views of atheism and agnosticism

1. Your child falls in love and becomes engaged to a person whom you admire and approve of. Later in the engagement, this person claims to not believe in the existence of God. How strongly do you support or object to the marriage?

	Strongly approve	Moderately approve	Somewhat approve	Somewhat disapprove	Moderately disapprove	Strongly disapprove
How strongly do you support or object to the marriage?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Further comments.

## 18. Views of atheism and agnosticism

1. How upset would you be if you had a child who did the following? (Note that you will need to select a different number for each choice).

	1= Not upset at all	2	3	4	5= Somewhat upset	6	7	8	9	10= Extremely upset
Commit a felony	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Convert to a different religion (such as from Christianity to Islam or Judaism to Buddhism)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lose his/her belief in the existence of God	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Further comments.

## 19. Religious Identity

## Views on atheism and agnosticism

### 1. What is your present religion or philosophical position? Are you...

- Protestant
- Roman Catholic
- Mormon
- Orthodox (Greek or Russian)
- Jewish
- Muslim
- Buddhist
- Hindu
- Pagan or Wiccan
- atheist
- agnostic
- non-religious
- Other (please specify)

### 20. For atheists and agnostics

You have been routed to this page because you self-identified as an atheist or agnostic.

The survey that you have been taking is specifically for theists/deists/believers and several of the questions make little sense for atheists or an agnostics.

There is a separate survey for non-theists located at:

[https://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=g0hUnwCEp0EYQM0RMVFK\\_2bQ\\_3d\\_3d](https://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=g0hUnwCEp0EYQM0RMVFK_2bQ_3d_3d)

I hope you consider participating in that survey instead.

Thanks very much.

### 21. About Your Beliefs and Affiliations

## Views on atheism and agnosticism

### 1. In your mind, what is the likelihood that the following exist?

For example, if you are not certain that there is an afterlife but find it very likely, you might list something like 80%, 90%, or even 99% for the afterlife item. If you are absolutely sure that something exists or is true, you can answer 100% and if you are sure something does not exist or is false, you can answer 0%.

	0%	1%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	99%	100%
GHOSTS	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
NATURE SPIRITS	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
TRADITIONAL GOD (an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all good creator and moral enforcer)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
SOULS	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
EVOLUTION BY NATURAL SELECTION	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
THE AFTERLIFE	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
ANGELS	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
ALIENS (humanoid beings with intelligence similar or superior to human intelligence)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
THE PYRAMIDS OF EGYPT	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
SUB-ATOMIC PARTICLES	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
DEISTIC GOD (A divine architect of the universe who does not interfere in human affairs)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comments and Additions (please note if you are not sure of the meaning of an item)

## 22. Your Intuitions

Believers vary in the number of times they have intuitions that events around them are the work of the divine. For instance, some believers more often interpret unfortunate events in terms of divine punishment (I lost my job because I was sinning in my personal life) or fortunate events in terms of divine reward or favor (I survived the car accident because God has a purpose for me).

The next few questions will ask you about any such intuitions you may have.

## Views on atheism and agnosticism

### 1. How often have you had the intuition that some unfortunate event was the result of God/gods punishing you for something you have done?

- I have this intuition every time such an unfortunate event occurs.
- I normally have this thought when such an unfortunate event occurs, but not always.
- I have this thought around half the times such unfortunate events occur.
- I sometimes have this thought when such an unfortunate event occurs, but not that often.
- I never have this thought when such an unfortunate event occurs.
- I have not experienced an unfortunate event.

## 23. About Your Intuitions

Believers vary in the number of times they have intuitions that events around them are the work of the divine. For instance, some believers more often interpret unfortunate events in terms of divine punishment (I lost my job because I was sinning in my personal life) or fortunate events in terms of divine reward or favor (I survived the car accident because God has a purpose for me).

The next few questions will ask you about any such intuitions you may have had.

### 1. On average, how strong are these intuitions?

- Very weak
- Moderately weak
- Somewhat weak
- Somewhat strong
- Moderately strong
- Very strong

If possible, please describe a time when you had such an intuition.

## 24. On Your Intuitions

Believers vary in the number of times they have intuitions that events around them are the work of the divine. For instance, some believers more often interpret unfortunate events in terms of divine punishment (I lost my job because I was sinning in my personal life) or fortunate events in terms of divine reward or favor (I survived the car accident because God has a purpose for me).

The next few questions will ask you about any such intuitions you may have had.

## Views on atheism and agnosticism

### 1. How often have you had the intuition that some fortunate event was the result of God/gods rewarding you or telling you that you are meant for something?

- I have this thought every time such a fortunate event occurs.
- I normally have this thought when such a fortunate event occurs, but not always.
- I have this thought on approximate half of the occasions such fortunate events occur.
- I sometimes have this thought when such a fortunate event occurs, but not that often.
- I never have this thought when such a fortunate event occurs.
- I have not experienced a fortunate event.

## 25. About Your Intuitions

Believers vary in the number of times they have intuitions that events around them are the work of the divine. For instance, some believers more often interpret unfortunate events in terms of divine punishment (I lost my job because I was sinning in my personal life) or fortunate events in terms of divine reward or favor (I survived the car accident because God has a purpose for me).

The next few questions will ask you about any such intuitions you may have had.

### 1. On average, how strong are these intuitions?

- Very weak
- Moderately weak
- Somewhat weak
- Somewhat strong
- Moderately strong
- Very strong

If possible, please describe a time when you had such an intuition.

## 26. About Your Intuitions

Believers vary in the number of times they have intuitions that events around them are the work of the divine. For instance, some believers more often interpret unfortunate events in terms of divine punishment (I lost my job because I was sinning in my personal life) or fortunate events in terms of divine reward or favor (I survived the car accident because God has a purpose for me).

The next few questions will ask you about any such intuitions you may have had.

## Views on atheism and agnosticism

**1. Besides rewards and punishments, many believers also experience intuitions of events around them being signs from the divine. For example, one believer, after his car failed to start, had the intuition that God did not want him to go on the trip he had planned.**

**How often do you have intuitions of events being signs from the divine (such as signs of warning, approval, or comfort)?**

- I constantly have such intuitions.
- I have such intuitions with great frequency.
- I have such intuitions with some degree of frequency.
- I have such intuitions, but only once in a while.
- I rarely have such intuitions.
- I have never had such an intuition.

## 27. About Your Intuitions

Believers vary in the number of times they have intuitions that events around them are the work of the divine. For instance, some believers more often interpret unfortunate events in terms of divine punishment (I lost my job because I was sinning in my personal life) or fortunate events in terms of divine reward or favor (I survived the car accident because God has a purpose for me).

The next few questions will ask you about any such intuitions you may have had.

**1. On average, how strong are these intuitions?**

- Very weak
- Moderately weak
- Somewhat weak
- Somewhat strong
- Moderately strong
- Very strong

If possible, please describe a time when you had such an intuition.

## 28. About Your Beliefs and Affiliations

## Views on atheism and agnosticism

### 1. How do you identify yourself politically?

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Democrat                                 | <input type="radio"/> Liberal Democrat (UK)         |
| <input type="radio"/> Republican                               | <input type="radio"/> Conservative Party (Canada)   |
| <input type="radio"/> Independent                              | <input type="radio"/> Bloc Québécois (Canada)       |
| <input type="radio"/> None                                     | <input type="radio"/> Liberal Party (Canada)        |
| <input type="radio"/> Conservative (UK)                        | <input type="radio"/> New Democratic Party (Canada) |
| <input type="radio"/> Labour (UK)                              |   |
| <input type="radio"/> Other (please specify party and country) |   |

## 29. About Your Beliefs and Affiliations

### 1. Are you currently a member of a religious organization such as a church, mosque, synagogue, or scriptural study group?

- Yes  
 No

If yes, please name the organization(s) and tell how long you have been a member.

## 30. About Your Beliefs and Affiliations

### 1. How frequently do you attend religious services or religion-oriented meetings?

- Every day  
 A few times a week  
 Once a week  
 A few times a month  
 Once a month  
 Once every few months  
 Rarely  
 Never  
 Other (please specify)

## 31. About You

### 1. How old are you?

## Views on atheism and agnosticism

### 32. About You

**1. Are you male or female?**

- Female  
 Male

### 33. About You

**1. What is your marital status?**

- Single  
 Married  
 Divorced  
 Widowed  
 Unmarried but with long term partner  
 Other (please specify)

### 34. About You

**1. Do you have children?**

- Yes  
 No

### 35. About You

**1. If you do have children, how many children do you have?**

### 36. About You

## Views on atheism and agnosticism

### 1. What is your ethnic origin?

- African, Black, African American
- Native American, Alaska Native
- White or Caucasian
- Asian (including Indian subcontinent)
- Asian American
- Hispanic, Latino
- Mexican American, Chicano
- Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander
- Puerto Rican
- Other (please specify)

## 37. About You

### 1. What is the approximate annual income of your household? In the comment box, please indicate currency (American dollars, Canadian dollars, Australian dollars, British pounds, Euros).

- Less than 18,000
- 18,001-25,000
- 25,001-35,000
- 35,001-50,000
- 50,001-75,000
- 75,001-100,000
- 100,001-250,000
- Over 250,000

Currency type and comment

## 38. About You

### 1. In what country (countries) are you a citizen?

## 39. About You

### 1. In what town/city and state/province do you live?

## Views on atheism and agnosticism

### 40. About Your Upbringing

**1. In what religion (if any) were you raised? (e.g. Catholic Christianity, Church of England, Judaism, Islam, Lakota, Buddhism, no religion)**

### 41. About Your Upbringing

**1. To what extent did you have a "religious upbringing?" That is, to what extent, adding it all up, did the important people in your life—such as your parents, teachers, and church officials (if any)—do the following as you were growing up?**

	0=To no extent at all	1=To a slight extent	2=To a mild extent	3=To a moderate extent	4=To an appreciable extent	5=To a considerable extent	6=To a great extent
Teach you to obey representatives of the divine (e.g. pastors, priests, rabbis)?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Emphasize that people will be rewarded or punished, IN THIS LIFE, for their actions?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Disapprove of you watching certain television programs or movies because of their being "evil" or "ungodly"?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Make it clear it would be a very bad thing to leave your religion?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Discuss world events in terms of religion (in particular how God/ancestors/spirits would view certain events or actions)?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Teach you to strictly obey the religion's commandments?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you pray before bedtime?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Encourage you to pray for guidance?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Emphasize attending special religious services (e.g. Christmas, Easter, Yom Kippur)?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Disapprove of your having friends who were non-religious?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Emphasize that people will be rewarded or punished for their actions IN AN AFTERLIFE OR FUTURE LIFE?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you pray before meals?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Views on atheism and agnosticism

Review the teachings of a religion at home?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Emphasize that there is a spiritual plan or purpose for your life?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Emphasize that you should read scriptures or other religious materials?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Teach you that your religion was the truest religion?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Emphasize regularly attending religious services?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Discuss moral dos and don'ts in religious terms?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Emphasize making religion an important part of your life?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Further comments on these items.

## 42. About Your Upbringing

**1. How concerned were you as you grew up about being the victim of some type of physical violence (e.g. bullying, corporal punishment, abuse, gangs)?**

- Not concerned at all
- Slightly or infrequently concerned
- Moderately concerned
- Significantly/frequently concerned
- Constantly concerned

Only if you feel comfortable doing so, please describe any concerns you had with physical violence as you were growing up.

## 43. About Your Upbringing

**1. How would you describe the environment in which you grew up?**

- Rural
- Suburban
- Urban
- Other (please specify)

## Views on atheism and agnosticism

### 44. Outdoor experience

**1. How often as you grew up did you experience the “outdoors” or “wilderness,” through such activities as camping, hiking, canoeing, walking in the woods, hunting, and fishing?**

- Rarely or never
- Once every few years
- Once a year
- Several times a year
- Several times a month
- Several times a week
- Constantly

Comments

### 45. About Your Upbringing

**1. How would you rate the level of RELIGIOUS diversity within the community in which you grew up?**

- Very diverse
- Moderately diverse
- Somewhat diverse
- Somewhat homogenous
- Moderately homogenous
- Very homogenous

Please give details.

### 46. About Your Parents.

## Views on atheism and agnosticism

**1. In TODAY'S MONEY, what was the approximate annual income of your household as you were growing up? In the comment box, please indicate the proper currency (American dollars, Canadian dollars, Australian dollars, British pounds, Euros).**

- Less than 1000
- 1000-2,500
- 2,501-5,000
- 5,001-7,500
- 7,501-10,000
- 10,001-15,000
- 15,001-20,000
- 20,001-25,000
- 25,001-35,000
- 35,001-50,000
- 50,001-75,000
- 75,001-100,000
- 100,000-250,000
- 250,001-350,000
- 350,001-500,000
- Over 500,000

Currency used

### 47. About Your Education

**1. Did you attend a religious school?**

- Yes
- No

If yes, please give details as to the type of school and the dates you attended.

### 48. About Your Education

**1. Have you graduated from high school?**

- Yes
- No

## Views on atheism and agnosticism

### 49. About Your Education

#### 1. What was your high school result?

**If from the US or Canada, please give your high school grade point average (e.g. 3.5/4.0). If from the UK, please list your A-levels and the grades you received for them. If from Australia, please give your score on the HSC.**

### 50. About Your Education

#### 1. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Middle School
- High School
- Associate's Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Postgraduate Degree
- Other (please specify)

### 51. Further Comments

**1. Please use the space below as you wish. Feel free to comment about any of the questions asked above. Also feel free to say anything you feel like you have not had a chance to say to this point in the survey.**

### 52. Contact Information

Your answers to this point have been completely anonymous and are much appreciated.

**1. Now, only if you are comfortable with a researcher contacting you to ask a few further questions about some of your responses, please provide your name and email address.**

**If you do not wish a researcher to contact you, please leave this comment box blank.**

## Follow-up Survey

These additional questions were sent to those individuals who left their email addresses on the initial survey and gave permission for me to contact them for such additional questions.

Survey follow-up (Atheism/Agnosticism)
<b>1. Welcome back!</b>
<p>Thanks to all of you for participating in the survey.</p> <p>As I examined the preliminary results of the first part of the survey and had conversations with many people, religious and non-religious, I realized that there are more questions worth asking as I try to better understand both religion and atheism/agnosticism.</p> <p>This set of questions is shorter than the last. Having said that, I have added the ability to leave this set of questions and reenter it at a later time, in case you do not wish to answer all the questions in one sitting.</p> <p>Thanks so much for your continued participation and I look forward to sharing my results with you when the project is completed.</p> <p>Jonathan A. Lanman DPhil Student Centre for Anthropology and Mind Institute of Cognitive &amp; Evolutionary Anthropology University of Oxford</p>
<b>2. E-mail confirmation</b>
<p><b>1. In order to properly match up your answers on these questions with those you gave on the earlier survey questions, please write in your e-mail address here (please use the same e-mail address you gave on the previous survey).</b></p> <input type="text"/>
<b>3. Views on Morality</b>

## Survey follow-up (Atheism/Agnosticism)

**1. Part 1. When you decide whether something is right or wrong, to what extent are the following considerations relevant to your thinking? Please rate each statement using this scale:**

**[0] = not at all relevant (This consideration has nothing to do with my judgments of right and wrong)**

**[1] = not very relevant**

**[2] = slightly relevant**

**[3] = somewhat relevant**

**[4] = very relevant**

**[5] = extremely relevant (This is one of the most important factors when I judge right and wrong)**

	0= not at all relevant	1= not very relevant	2= slightly relevant	3= somewhat relevant	4= very relevant	5= extremely relevant
Whether or not someone suffered emotionally	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Whether or not some people were treated differently than others	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Whether or not someone's action showed love for his or her country	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Whether or not someone showed a lack of respect for authority	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Whether or not someone violated standards of purity and decency	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Whether or not someone was good at math	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Whether or not someone cared for someone weak or vulnerable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Whether or not someone acted unfairly	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Whether or not someone did something to betray his or her group	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Whether or not someone conformed to the traditions of society	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Whether or not someone did something disgusting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Further comments

## 4. Views on Morality

## Survey follow-up (Atheism/Agnosticism)

**1. Part 2. Please read the following sentences and indicate your agreement or disagreement:**

	0= Strongly disagree	1= Moderately disagree	2= Slightly disagree	3= Slightly agree	4= Moderately agree	5= Strongly agree
Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When the government makes laws, the number one principle should be ensuring that everyone is treated fairly.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am proud of my country's history.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Respect for authority is something all children need to learn.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
People should not do things that are disgusting, even if no one is harmed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It is better to do good than to do bad.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Justice is the most important requirement for a society.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
People should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Men and women each have different roles to play in society.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comments

## 5. Moral upbringing

Parents emphasize different values in the moral upbringing of their children. Some emphasize community/group responsibility while others emphasize individuality. Some emphasize obedience to authority while others emphasize equality.

The following questions will ask you what values your parents emphasized as you were growing up.

## Survey follow-up (Atheism/Agnosticism)

### 1. To what extent did your parents emphasize the importance of compassion and empathy?

0= To no extent at all    1    2    3= To a moderate extent    4    5    6= To a great extent

Compassion/Empathy                           

Comments and/or specific instances

### 2. To what extent did your parents emphasize the importance of authority?

0= To no extent at all    1    2    3= To a moderate extent    4    5    6= To a great extent

Authority                           

Comments and/or specific instances

### 3. To what extent did your parents encourage you to be patriotic about your country?

0= To no extent at all    1    2    3= To a moderate extent    4    5    6= To a great extent

Patriotism                           

Comments and/or specific instances

### 4. Some parents emphasize the authority they have over their children while others try to minimize this authority and make their children feel like equals in decision-making.

#### Please rate your parents on authority vs. equality in the household.

Very authoritarian    Moderately authoritarian    Somewhat authoritarian    Somewhat egalitarian    Moderately egalitarian    Very egalitarian

Authority vs. Equality                       

Comments and/or specific instances

## Survey follow-up (Atheism/Agnosticism)

**5. To what extent did your parents emphasize the importance of fairness and justice for all people (regardless of race, class, and religion)?**

0= To no extent at all      1      2      3= To a moderate extent      4      5      6= To a great extent

Fairness and Justice:

Comments and/or specific instances

**6. To what extent did your parents emphasize that the sexual (e.g. homosexuality) or dietary (e.g. killing and eating sheep in one's back garden) practices of others were "disgusting"?**

0= To no extent at all      1      2      3= To a moderate extent      4      5      6= To a great extent

Sexual/dietary disgust:

Comments and/or specific instances

## 6. About Your Beliefs

**1. In your mind, what is the likelihood that the following exist?**

**For example, if you are not certain that there is no such thing as free will but find it highly improbable, you might list 1% for the free will item.**

	0%	1%	5%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	99%	100%
TELEPATHY (Communication through means other than the five traditional senses)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
FREE WILL (the ability of a person to make free choices; this entails the belief that our actions are not determined by the combination of genetic and environmental factors)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Comments	<div style="border: 1px solid gray; height: 30px; width: 100%;"></div>													

## 7. Displays of Commitment

**1. Did at least one of your parents believe in the existence of God/gods/supernatural forces as you were growing up?**

- Yes
- No

## Survey follow-up (Atheism/Agnosticism)

### 8. Displays of Commitment

Religious believers demonstrate different degrees of commitment to their beliefs. Some show strong commitment by frequently attending religious meetings, praying, showing emotion in religious settings, giving money or time to religious organizations, fasting, or participating in public displays such as baptism, reconciliation, or religious healing.

Others have religious beliefs but do not engage in these activities or engage in them to a much lesser extent.

The following questions are about your BELIEVING parent(s). If only one parent is a believer, answer for that person; do not average the believer and the non-believer together.

#### 1. How frequently did your parent(s) attend religious services or meetings?

0= Not at all    1    2    3= Moderately frequently    4    5    6= Very frequently

Attending services or meetings

Comments

#### 2. How frequently did you witness your parent(s) praying, such as at meals or family activities?

0= Not at all    1    2    3= Moderately frequently    4    5    6= Very frequently

Parental prayer

Comments

#### 3. Did your parent(s) fast or make other sacrifices for religious reasons?

- Yes  
 No

#### 4. If yes, did your parent(s) follow through with their fasting/sacrifices?

- Always  
 Mostly  
 Sometimes  
 Rarely  
 Never

Comments

## Survey follow-up (Atheism/Agnosticism)

**5. Please rate the amount/percentage of income your parent(s) gave to religious organizations and religious charities.**

0= None    1    2    3= A moderate amount/percentage    4    5    6= A great amount/percentage

Amount given                           

Comments

**6. To what extent did your parent(s) participate in religious charity work or religious teaching (such as Sunday school)?**

0= To no extent at all    1    2    3= To a moderate extent    4    5    6= To a great extent

Religious charity work and religious teaching                       

Comments

**7. Did your parents participate in public displays of commitment such as baptism, reconciliation, or religious healing ceremonies?**

- Yes  
 No

If yes, please describe

**8. To what extent did your parent(s) bring up religion in public outside of religious settings (e.g. telling people whom they have just met that Jesus loves them or that Allah is watching)?**

0= To no extent at all    1    2    3= To a moderate extent    4    5    6= To a great extent

Bringing up religion                       

Comments

**9. To what extent did your parent(s) display emotion (e.g. elation, sadness) in response to religious ideas or in religious services?**

0= To no extent at all    1    2    3= To a moderate extent    4    5    6= To a great extent

Display emotion                       

Comments

## Survey follow-up (Atheism/Agnosticism)

**10. Did your parent(s) ever experience altered states of consciousness such as speaking in tongues, trance states, or possession?**

Yes

No

If yes, please describe and indicate approximately how often this happened.

**11. Please use this space to describe any other displays of commitment not covered by these questions.**

### 9. Displays of Commitment

Religious believers demonstrate different degrees of commitment to their beliefs. Some show strong commitment by frequently attending religious meetings, praying, showing emotion in religious settings, giving money or time to religious organizations, fasting, or participating in public displays such as baptism, reconciliation, or religious healing.

Others have religious beliefs but do not engage in these activities or engage in them to a much lesser extent.

**1. Did you attend or participate in any churches, religious organizations, or camps while you were growing up?**

Yes

No

### 10. Displays of Commitment

Religious believers demonstrate different degrees of commitment to their beliefs. Some show strong commitment by frequently attending religious meetings, praying, showing emotion in religious settings, giving money or time to religious organizations, fasting, or participating in public displays such as baptism, reconciliation, or religious healing.

Others have religious beliefs but do not engage in these activities or engage in them to a much lesser extent.

**1. You will have the ability to answer the following questions for 2 different organizations.**

**Please name the first organization/church/camp.**

## Survey follow-up (Atheism/Agnosticism)

**2. Did the leaders of this organization/congregation/camp make sacrifices to the religion, such as celibacy, fasting, funding activities with their own money?**

Yes

No

If yes, please describe

**3. To what extent did group members engage in charitable work together?**

	0 = To no extent	1	2	3 = To a moderate extent	4	5	6 = To a great extent
Collaborative charitable work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comments

**4. To what extent did members of this organization/congregation/camp show emotion (e.g. elation, sadness) in services/meetings?**

	0 = To no extent at all	1	2	3 = To a moderate extent	4	5	6 = To a great extent
Showing emotion	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comments

**5. To what extent did members of this organization/congregation behave as if they were engaged in altered states of consciousness such as speaking in tongues, trance, or possession?**

	0 = To no extent at all	1	2	3 = To a moderate extent	4	5	6 = To a great extent
Altered states	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comments

**6. Please use this space to describe any other displays of commitment in which members of this group participated.**

## Survey follow-up (Atheism/Agnosticism)

### 7. Did you participate in another religious organization, church, or camp?

Yes

No

## 11. Displays of Commitment

Religious believers demonstrate different degrees of commitment to their beliefs. Some show strong commitment by frequently attending religious meetings, praying, showing emotion in religious settings, giving money or time to religious organizations, fasting, or participating in public displays such as baptism, reconciliation, or religious healing.

Others have religious beliefs but do not engage in these activities or engage in them to a much lesser extent.

### 1. Please name this second organization/church/camp.

### 2. Did the leaders of this organization/congregation/camp make sacrifices to the religion, such as celibacy, fasting, funding activities with their own money?

Yes

No

If yes, please describe

### 3. To what extent did group members engage in charitable work together?

	0 = To no extent	1	2	3 = To a moderate extent	4	5	6 = To a great extent
Collaborative charitable work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comments

### 4. To what extent did members of this organization/congregation/camp show emotion (e.g. elation, sadness) in services/meetings?

	0 = To no extent at all	1	2	3 = To a moderate extent	4	5	6 = To a great extent
Showing emotion	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comments

## Survey follow-up (Atheism/Agnosticism)

**5. To what extent did members of this organization/congregation behave as if they were engaged in altered states of consciousness such as speaking in tongues, trance, or possession?**

0= To no extent at all      1      2      3= To a moderate extent      4      5      6= To a great extent

Altered states

Comments

**6. Please use this space to describe any other displays of commitment in which members of this group participated.**

## 12. Community support

Historians and observers of religion frequently point out that religious groups provide support for their members by providing food, shelter, and other resources in times of need.

Since the industrial revolution, fewer people in industrialized countries rely on religious groups for this support. They may rely on the social welfare policies of their governments or on the generosity of family and close friends if they fall on hard times.

People who do not have access to social welfare benefits or the generosity of family and friends, however, are much more vulnerable to homelessness, serious illness, and starvation and normally have shorter life expectancies.

**1. How vulnerable would you (and any children you may have) be to homelessness, serious illness, and starvation if you lost your job or your present sources of income?**

- Not vulnerable at all
- Slightly vulnerable
- Somewhat vulnerable
- Moderately vulnerable
- Significantly vulnerable
- Extremely vulnerable

**2. If you do not feel very vulnerable, what gives you your feeling of security (e.g. family members or a close-knit group of friends whom you feel confident would support you, a government or religious group with strong assistance programs, a religious group, a large personal fortune)?**

**If you do feel vulnerable, what particular concerns would you have in a time of need (e.g. health care costs, rent, providing for kids)?**

## Survey follow-up (Atheism/Agnosticism)

### 3. Further comments about questions on this page.

### 13. Comments

Similarly to the last survey, if you have any comments on the survey as a whole, specific questions, or would just like to say something you haven't had a chance to thusfar, please feel free to share.

#### 1. Comments

## APPENDIX C. RELIGIOUS EMPHASIS SCALES

Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006) utilize the following Religious Emphasis Scale in order to ascertain the degree to which parents and other guardians emphasized religious beliefs and behaviours as the participant was growing up. Given the obvious Christian emphasis/bias in this scale, I deemed it unsuitable for a world-wide survey and altered several of the questions, in addition to adding my own questions pertaining to the emphasis of supernatural punishment, as can be seen in the second set of questions. These questions were included in both the non-theist and theist surveys.

*To what extent did you have a “religious upbringing”? That is, to what extent, adding it all up, did the important people in your life—such as your parents, teachers, and church officials (if any)—do the following as you were growing up?*

- 0= To no extent at all*
- 1= To a slight extent*
- 2= To a mild extent*
- 3= To a moderate extent*
- 4= To an appreciable extent*
- 5= To a considerable extent*
- 6= To a great extent*

- 1. Emphasize attending religious services as acts of personal devotion?*
- 2. Review the teachings of the religion at home?*
- 3. Make religion the center, the most important part of your life?*
- 4. Emphasize that you should read scriptures or other religious materials?*
- 5. Discuss moral “dos” and “don’ts” in religious terms?*
- 6. Make it clear that about the worst thing you could do in life would be to abandon your religion?*
- 7. Stress being a good representative of your faith, who acted the way a devout member of your religion was expected to act?*
- 8. Teach you that your religion’s rules about morality were absolutely right, not to be questioned?*
- 9. Tell you how wonderful it would be in heaven for all eternity?*
- 10. Teach you that your religion was the truest religion, closest to God?*
- 11. Stress that it was your responsibility to fight Satan all your life?*
- 12. Impress upon you that unrepentant sinners would burn in hell for all eternity?*
- 13. Make religion relevant to almost all aspects of your life?*
- 14. Tell you how wrong it was to sin against a loving God?*
- 15. Have you pray before bedtime?*
- 16. Teach you to strictly obey the commandments of almighty God?*
- 17. Teach you that persons who tried to change the meaning of scripture and religious laws were evil and doing the devil’s work?*

18. *Get you to do many “extra” religious acts so that the family religion “filled your life”?*
19. *Make a personal commitment to God as your only hope and savior?*
20. *Teach you to obey the persons who acted as God’s representatives, such as priests, ministers, or rabbis?*

Revised Version of Religious Emphasis Scale:

(Presented in randomized order through the surveymonkey software)

To what extent did you have a “religious upbringing?” That is, to what extent, adding it all up, did the important people in your life—such as your parents, teachers, and church officials (if any)—do the following as you were growing up?

- 0= To no extent at all
- 1= To a slight extent
- 2= To a mild extent
- 3= To a moderate extent
- 4= To an appreciable extent
- 5= To a considerable extent
- 6= To a great extent

1. Emphasize regularly attending religious services?
2. Discuss world events in terms of religion (in particular how God/ancestors/spirits would view certain events or actions)?
3. Emphasize that you should read scripture or other religious materials?
4. Emphasize attending special religious services (e.g. Christmas, Easter, Yom Kippur)?
5. Make it clear it would be a very bad thing to leave your religion?
6. Disapprove of your having friends who were non-religious?
7. Review the teachings of a religion at home?
8. Emphasize that people will be rewarded or punished **IN THIS LIFE** for their actions?
9. Discuss moral do’s and don’ts in religious terms?
10. Emphasize making religion an important part of your life?
11. Emphasize that there is a spiritual plan or purpose for your life?
12. Emphasize that people will be rewarded or punished **IN AN AFTERLIFE OR FUTURE LIFE** for their actions.
13. Have you pray before bedtime?
14. Encourage you to pray for guidance?
15. Have you pray before meals?
16. Teach you to strictly obey the religion’s commandments?
17. Teach you to strictly obey representatives of the divine (e.g. pastors, priests, rabbis)?
18. Teach you that your religion was the truest religion?
19. Disapprove of your watching certain television programs or movies because of their being “evil” or “ungodly?”

## APPENDIX D. CREDIBILITY ENHANCING DISPLAYS (CREDS)

To construct a variable for exposure to Credibility Enhancing Displays (CREDS), I asked several questions about two broad categories of experience, as an individual may witness many CREDS from his or her parents while witnessing few from members of their religious groups.

The two broad categories are:

- 1) Experience with parents/guardians
- 2) Experience with religious groups

Questions related to each category of experience pertained to different ways in which the individuals involved, parents/guardians or fellow group members, could demonstrate their beliefs through actions.

## Questions on Parents

### Non-theism follow-up ver2

#### 1. Did at least one of your parents believe in the existence of God/gods/supernatural forces?

- Yes  
 No

### 8. Displays of Commitment

Religious believers demonstrate different degrees of commitment to their beliefs. Some show strong commitment by frequently attending religious meetings, praying, showing emotion in religious settings, giving money or time to religious organizations, fasting, or participating in public displays such as baptism, reconciliation, or religious healing.

Others have religious beliefs but do not engage in these activities or engage in them to a much lesser extent.

The following questions are about your BELIEVING parent(s). If only one parent is a believer, answer for that person; do not average the believer and the non-believer together.

#### 1. How frequently did your parent(s) attend religious services or meetings?

0= Not at all      1      2      3= Moderately frequently      4      5      6= Very frequently

Attending services or meetings                                         

Comments

#### 2. How frequently did you witness your parent(s) praying, such as at meals or family activities?

0= Not at all      1      2      3= Moderately frequently      4      5      6= Very frequently

Parental prayer                                         

Comments

#### 3. Did your parent(s) fast or make other sacrifices for religious reasons?

- Yes  
 No

## Non-theism follow-up ver2

**4. If yes, did your parent(s) follow through with their fasting/sacrifices?**

- Always  
 Mostly  
 Sometimes  
 Rarely  
 Never

Comments

**5. Please rate the amount/percentage of income your parent(s) gave to religious organizations and religious charities.**

	0= None	1	2	3= A moderate amount/percentage	4	5	6= A great amount/percentage
Amount given	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comments

**6. To what extent did your parent(s) participate in religious charity work or religious teaching (such as Sunday school)?**

	0= To no extent at all	1	2	3= To a moderate extent	4	5	6= To a great extent
Religious charity work and religious teaching	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comments

**7. Did your parents participate in public displays of commitment such as baptism, reconciliation, or religious healing ceremonies?**

- Yes  
 No

If yes, please describe

## Non-theism follow-up ver2

**8. To what extent did your parent(s) bring up religion in public outside of religious settings (e.g. telling people whom they have just met that Jesus loves them or that Allah is watching)?**

0= To no extent at all    1    2    3= To a moderate extent    4    5    6= To a great extent

Bringing up religion                           

Comments

**9. To what extent did your parent(s) display emotion (e.g. elation, sadness) in response to religious ideas or in religious services?**

0= To no extent at all    1    2    3= To a moderate extent    4    5    6= To a great extent

Display emotion                           

Comments

**10. Did your parent(s) ever experience altered states of consciousness such as speaking in tongues, trance states, or possession?**

- Yes  
 No

If yes, please describe and indicate approximately how often this happened.

**11. Please use this space to describe any other displays of commitment not covered by these questions.**

## 9. Displays of Commitment

Religious believers demonstrate different degrees of commitment to their beliefs. Some show strong commitment by frequently attending religious meetings, praying, showing emotion in religious settings, giving money or time to religious organizations, fasting, or participating in public displays such as baptism, reconciliation, or religious healing.

Others have religious beliefs but do not engage in these activities or engage in them to a much lesser extent.

## Questions on Religious Groups

### Non-theism follow-up ver2

**1. Did you attend or participate in any churches, religious organizations, or camps while you were growing up?**

- Yes  
 No

### 10. Displays of Commitment

Religious believers demonstrate different degrees of commitment to their beliefs. Some show strong commitment by frequently attending religious meetings, praying, showing emotion in religious settings, giving money or time to religious organizations, fasting, or participating in public displays such as baptism, reconciliation, or religious healing.

Others have religious beliefs but do not engage in these activities or engage in them to a much lesser extent.

**1. You will have the ability to answer the following questions for 2 different organizations.**

**Please name the first organization/church/camp.**

**2. Did the leaders of this organization/congregation/camp make sacrifices to the religion, such as celibacy, fasting, funding activities with their own money?**

- Yes  
 No

If yes, please describe

**3. To what extent did group members engage in charitable work together?**

	0= To no extent	1	2	3= To a moderate extent	4	5	6= To a great extent
Collaborative charitable work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comments

**4. To what extent did members of this organization/congregation/camp show emotion (e.g. elation, sadness) in services/meetings?**

	0= To no extent at all	1	2	3= To a moderate extent	4	5	6= To a great extent
Showing emotion	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comments

## Non-theism follow-up ver2

**5. To what extent did members of this organization/congregation behave as if they were engaged in altered states of consciousness such as speaking in tongues, trance, or possession?**

0= To no extent at all      1      2      3= To a moderate extent      4      5      6= To a great extent

Altered states                                         

Comments

**6. Please use this space to describe any other displays of commitment in which members of this group participated.**

**7. Did you participate in another religious organization, church, or camp?**

- Yes  
 No

## 11. Displays of Commitment

Religious believers demonstrate different degrees of commitment to their beliefs. Some show strong commitment by frequently attending religious meetings, praying, showing emotion in religious settings, giving money or time to religious organizations, fasting, or participating in public displays such as baptism, reconciliation, or religious healing.

Others have religious beliefs but do not engage in these activities or engage in them to a much lesser extent.

**1. Please name this second organization/church/camp.**

**2. Did the leaders of this organization/congregation/camp make sacrifices to the religion, such as celibacy, fasting, funding activities with their own money?**

- Yes  
 No

If yes, please describe

## Non-theism follow-up ver2

### 3. To what extent did group members engage in charitable work together?

0= To no extent      1      2      3= To a moderate extent      4      5      6= To a great extent

Collaborative charitable work                                         

Comments

### 4. To what extent did members of this organization/congregation/camp show emotion (e.g. elation, sadness) in services/meetings?

0= To no extent at all      1      2      3= To a moderate extent      4      5      6= To a great extent

Showing emotion                                         

Comments

### 5. To what extent did members of this organization/congregation behave as if they were engaged in altered states of consciousness such as speaking in tongues, trance, or possession?

0= To no extent at all      1      2      3= To a moderate extent      4      5      6= To a great extent

Altered states                                         

Comments

### 6. Please use this space to describe any other displays of commitment in which members of this group participated.

## 12. Community support

Historians and observers of religion frequently point out that religious groups provide support for their members by providing food, shelter, and other resources in times of need.

Since the industrial revolution, fewer people in industrialized countries rely on religious groups for this support. They may rely on the social welfare policies of their governments or on the generosity of family and close friends if they fall on hard times.

People who do not have access to social welfare benefits or the generosity of family and friends, however, are much more vulnerable to homelessness, serious illness, and starvation and normally have shorter life expectancies.

## Scoring

-The Yes/No questions for both the parental and group exposure sections were scored 0=No and 1=Yes.

-The questions that asked participants to rate “to what extent” their parents or group members engaged in particular behaviours. All such questions were rated on a scale from “0=To no extent at all” to “6= To a great extent.”

-On most questions, these 0-6 scores translated directly to CREDs scores, which were added together for each domain of experience, parental and group. Yet, for several questions in the parental domain, including parents attending meetings/services, praying, following through on sacrifices, money given, and engaging in teaching/volunteer work, a “hypocrisy penalty” was enforced on the scoring, reflecting the fact that having a parent profess belief in the existence of supernatural agencies, but then not ever being witnessed engaging in such CREDs is likely to actually lower the prospects of belief in children, rather than just not contributing positively to the score. Support for this assumption lies in the fact that so many non-theists explicitly mention a lack of any CREDs on the part of their parents in describing their beliefs and the frequent references to “hypocrisy” as a factor in their giving up religious beliefs (for those that had them to begin with). Thus, for these questions, rather than scoring them 0-6, they were scored -1 to 5, allowing an individual to actually develop a negative CREDs exposure score.

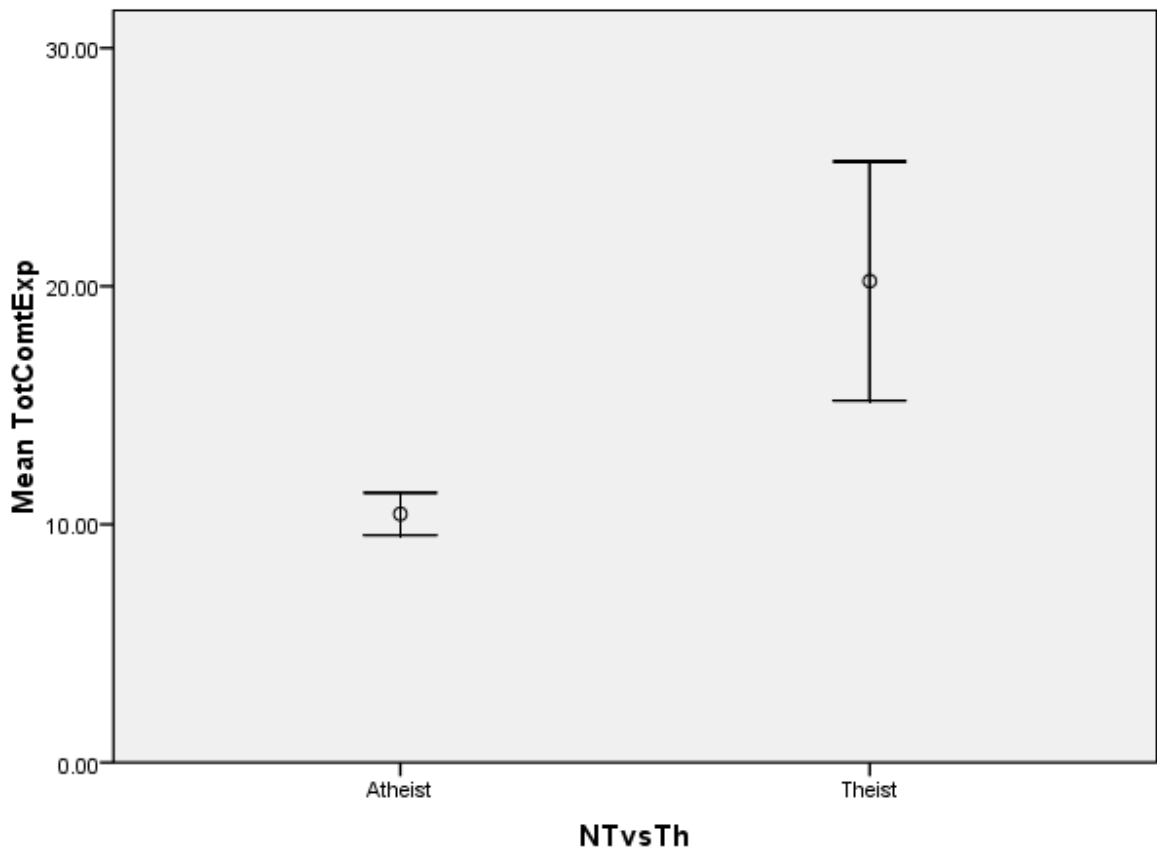
-Parental CREDs scores, then, could vary in total from -5 to 38. Each group score and, thus, the average group score ranged from 0 to 19.

-The total CREDs exposure score, then, which consisted of adding a participant’s Parental CREDs score to their average Group CREDs score, could range from -5 to 57.

## Comparison between theist and non-theist participants:

The difference between non-theists (classified by their self-identifying as atheist, non-theist, agnostic, humanist, or bright) and theists (classified by their self-identifying as theists, Christians, Jews, or Muslims) on Total CRED Exposure was both significant and substantial (Non-theist mean score= 10.43, SD=11.56, Theist mean score= 20.21, SD=12.95,  $t=-4.36$ ,  $df= 672$ ,  $p< .001$ ).

The figure below shows the differences in average commitment exposure between non-theists and theists.



Error Bars: 95% CI

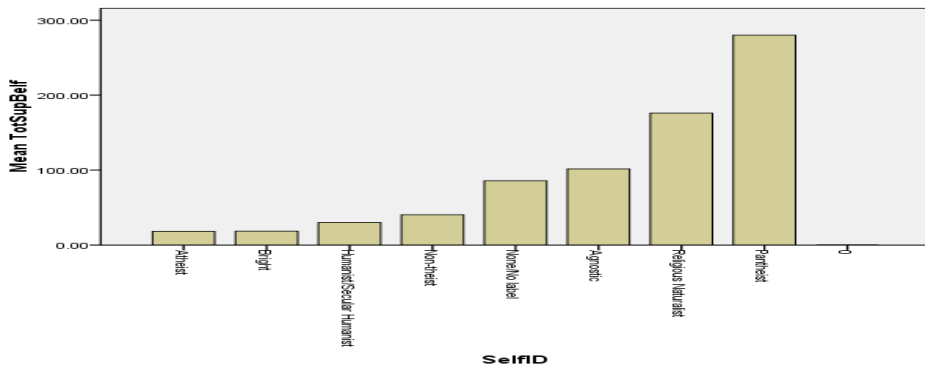
## APPENDIX E. EXPLICIT SUPERNATURAL BELIEF

Total Supernatural Belief (TSB) scores are tallied by adding up the likelihood a participant grants to all supernatural items. Each participant, and each category of participant, can also receive an average TSB score, reflecting the average probability that individual, or member of a particular group, grants to an individual supernatural concept.

-The average TSB scores for self-identified categories are:

Label	Participants	TSB	TSB avg.
Self-identified Atheists:	N= 1452	18.36	2.3%
Self-identified Agnostics:	N= 219	101.58	12.7%
Self-identified Non-theists	N= 51	40.45	5.1%
Self-identified Religious Naturalist	N=6	176.00	22.0%
Self-identified Pantheists	N=12	279.83	35.0%
Self-identified Humanists	N=193	30.18	3.8%
Self-identified Brights	N=72	18.56	2.3%
No self-identifying labels	N= 112	85.87	10.7%

Below is a graphical representation of the data above:



The table below presents average belief scores for each self-identified category of non-theist for each supernatural item.

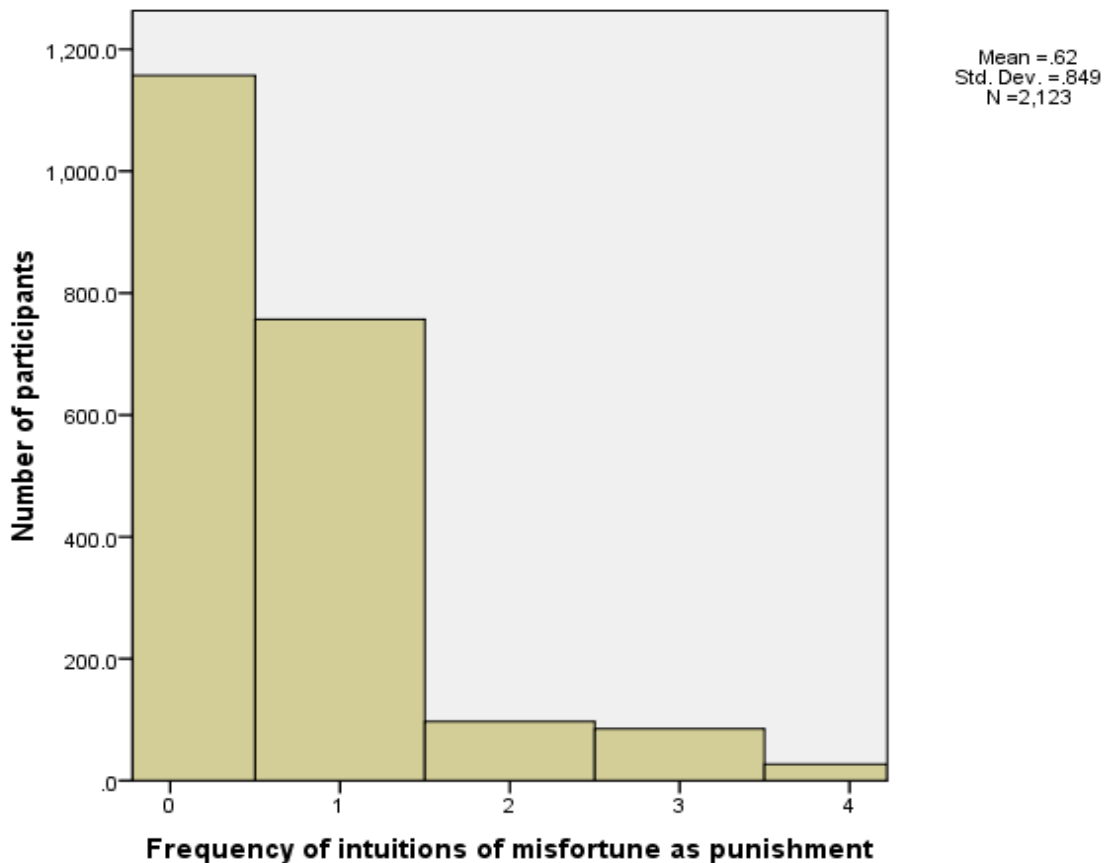
	Trad. God	Deistic God	Some Higher Power	Ghosts	Souls	The Afterlife	Karma	Angels
Atheists N=1452	0.4%	2.1%	2.9%	2.8%	3.3%	1.8%	4.1%	1.0%
Non-theists N=51	1.2%	6.1%	9.8%	5.7%	5.8%	3.7%	7.7%	1.5%
Agnostics N=219	4.5%	14.5%	21.8%	11.8%	17.3%	12.4%	16.1%	5.5%
Religious Naturalists N=6	0.5%	16.8%	42.0%	20.2%	37.0%	17.2%	25.5%	16.8%
Pantheists N=12	1.3%	36.0%	65.6%	34.3%	50.0%	33.6%	31.3%	30.3%
Humanists N=193	1.0%	3.4%	8.2%	3.1%	4.2%	3.2%	5.5%	1.9%
Brights N=72	0.3%	2.5%	3.9%	1.3%	3.9%	1.8%	3.3%	1.2%
None/No label N=112	3.0%	3.9%	15.5%	14.7%	21.7%	8.8%	12.4%	6.0%

## APPENDIX F. THEISTIC INTUITIONS

The bar graph below depicts the numbers of non-theists reporting theistic intuitions in response to the question:

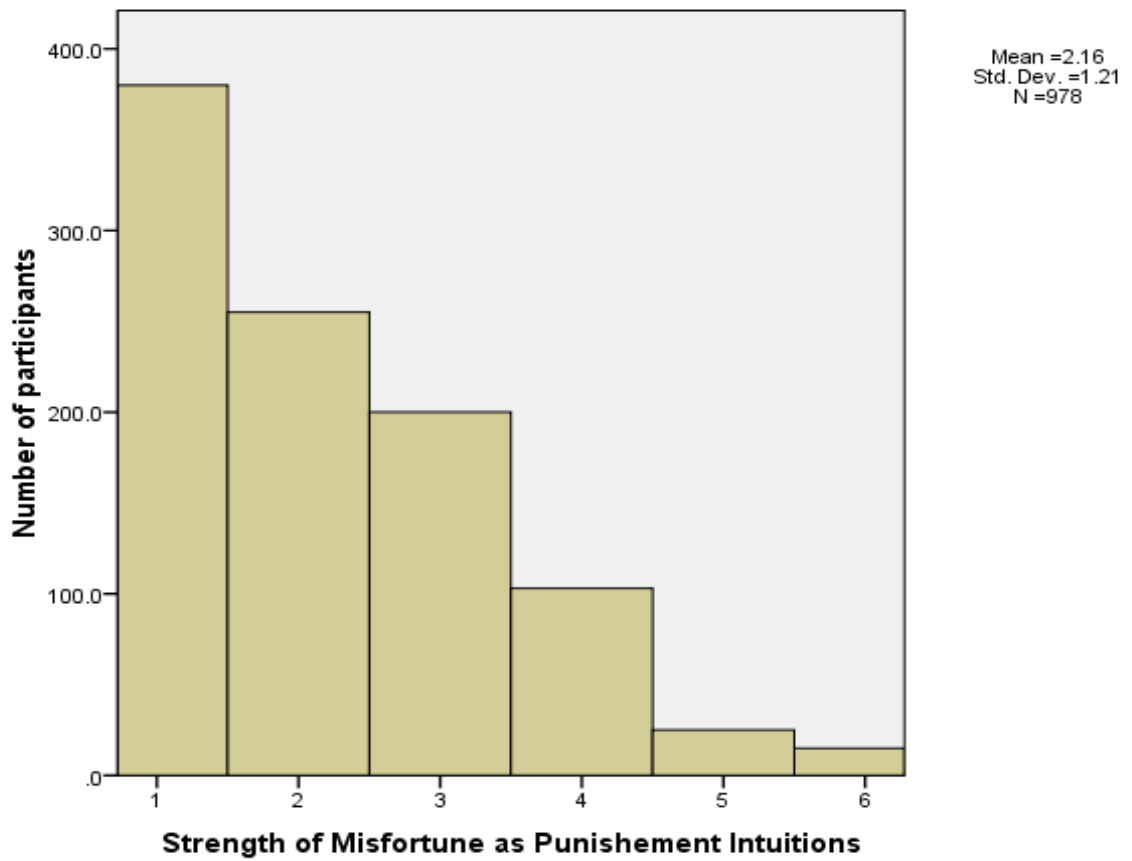
How often, since you have held your current views, have you had the thought “Why me? I’m a good person” when you experience an unfortunate occurrence (e.g. becoming seriously ill, losing a loved one, experiencing failure, losing your job, losing a significant amount of money, having a car accident) ?

- 0= never having such intuitions,
- 1= sometimes but not often,
- 2= half of the time,
- 3= normally but not always, and
- 4= every time such an unfortunate event occurs.



The bar graph below depicts the numbers of non-theists reporting different levels of strength in their theistic intuitions regarding misfortune as punishment.

- 1= Very weak,
- 2= Moderately weak,
- 3= Somewhat weak,
- 4= Somewhat strong,
- 5= Moderately strong,
- 6= Very strong.



## APPENDIX G. MORAL FOUNDATIONS

The following is a chart from Haidt and Joseph (2009), showing the 5 moral foundations, the adaptive challenges they were designed to meet, their adaptive environmental triggers, their actual set of environmental triggers, the emotions they normally help produce, and some socio-cultural virtues constructed from them.

	<b>Harm/Care</b>	<b>Fairness/ Reciprocity</b>	<b>Ingroup/ Loyalty</b>	<b>Authority/ Respect</b>	<b>Purity/ Sanctity</b>
<b>Adaptive challenge</b>	Protect and care for young, vulnerable, or injured kin	Reap benefits of dyadic cooperation with non-kin	Reap benefits of group cooperation	Negotiate hierarchy, defer selectively	Avoid microbes and parasites
<b>Proper domain (adaptive triggers)</b>	Suffering, distress, or threat to one's kin	Cheating, cooperation, deception	Threat or challenge to group	Signs of dominance and submission	Waste products, diseased people
<b>Actual domain (the set of all triggers)</b>	Baby seals, cartoon characters	Marital fidelity, broken vending machines	Sports teams one roots for	Bosses, respected professionals	Taboo ideas (communism, racism)
<b>Characteristic emotions</b>	Compassion	anger, gratitude, guilt	Group pride, belongingness; rage at traitors	Respect, fear	Disgust
<b>Relevant virtues [and vices]</b>	Caring, kindness, [cruelty]	fairness, justice, honesty, trustworthiness [dishonesty]	Loyalty, patriotism, self-sacrifice [treason, cowardice]	Obedience, deference [disobedience, uppitiness]	Temperance, chastity, piety, cleanliness [lust, intemperance]

## APPENDIX H. MORAL FOUNDATIONS QUESTIONNAIRE

The following questionnaire is taken from Jonathan Haidt's website, <http://faculty.virginia.edu/haidtlab/mft/index.php?t=questionnaires>. It is the 20-item version of the scale. There is a 30-item version, but an additional 10 questions in an already lengthy follow-up survey was deemed unnecessary.

### **Moral Foundations Questionnaire**

Part 1. When you decide whether something is right or wrong, to what extent are the following considerations relevant to your thinking? Please rate each statement using this scale:

- [0] = not at all relevant (This consideration has nothing to do with my judgments of right and wrong)
- [1] = not very relevant
- [2] = slightly relevant
- [3] = somewhat relevant
- [4] = very relevant
- [5] = extremely relevant (This is one of the most important factors when I judge right and wrong)

- \_\_\_\_\_ Whether or not someone suffered emotionally
- \_\_\_\_\_ Whether or not some people were treated differently than others
- \_\_\_\_\_ Whether or not someone's action showed love for his or her country
- \_\_\_\_\_ Whether or not someone showed a lack of respect for authority
- \_\_\_\_\_ Whether or not someone violated standards of purity and decency
- \_\_\_\_\_ Whether or not someone was good at math
- \_\_\_\_\_ Whether or not someone cared for someone weak or vulnerable
- \_\_\_\_\_ Whether or not someone acted unfairly
- \_\_\_\_\_ Whether or not someone did something to betray his or her group
- \_\_\_\_\_ Whether or not someone conformed to the traditions of society
- \_\_\_\_\_ Whether or not someone did something disgusting

Part 2. Please read the following sentences and indicate your agreement or disagreement:

[0]	[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]	[5]
Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	Slightly disagree	Slightly agree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree

- \_\_\_\_\_ Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue.
- \_\_\_\_\_ When the government makes laws, the number one principle should be ensuring that everyone is treated fairly.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I am proud of my country's history.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Respect for authority is something all children need to learn.
- \_\_\_\_\_ People should not do things that are disgusting, even if no one is harmed.
- \_\_\_\_\_ It is better to do good than to do bad.
- \_\_\_\_\_ One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenceless animal.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Justice is the most important requirement for a society.
- \_\_\_\_\_ People should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Men and women each have different roles to play in society.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural.

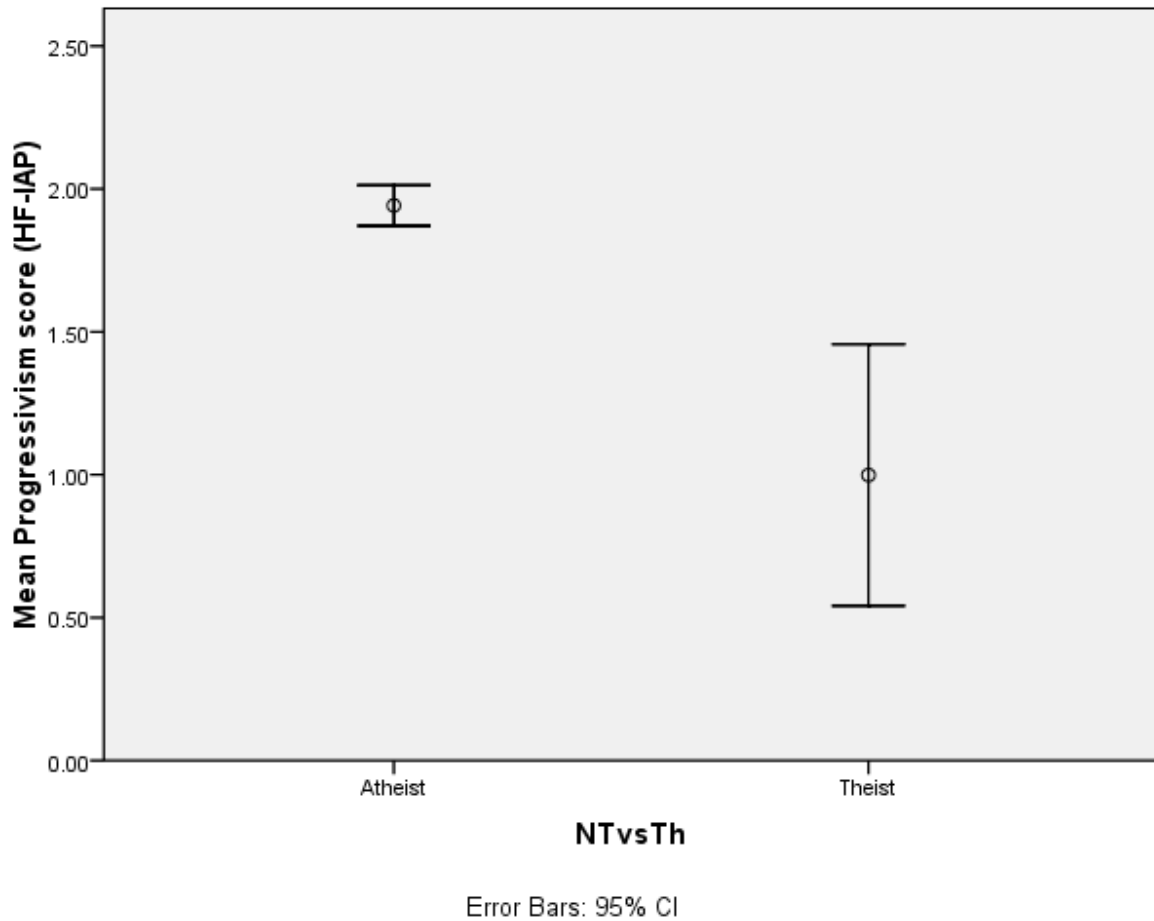
The Moral Foundations Questionnaire (short version, July 2008) by Jesse Graham, Jonathan Haidt, and Brian Nosek.

For more information about Moral Foundations Theory and scoring this form, see:  
[www.MoralFoundations.org](http://www.MoralFoundations.org)

## APPENDIX I. MORAL PROGRESSIVISM SCORES

The graph below shows the average moral progressivism scores for non-theists and theists, which are significantly different based on an independent samples t-test.

Non-theist Mean=1.94 (SD=.94), Theist Mean=1.00 (SD=1.11), ( $t=4.91$ ,  $df=684$ ,  $p<.001$ , two-tailed).



Below is a graph showing the average Moral Emphasis Scores on Liberal Foundations (Harm/Care, Fairness/Reciprocity) and also on Conservative Foundations (Ingroup/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, Purity/Sanctity).

As expected, non-theists, with their moral sentiments based mostly on the foundations of harm/care and fairness/reciprocity, received greater emphasis on the liberal moral foundations than the conservative moral foundations, as revealed by a paired t-test: (Liberal foundations Mean= 3.91, SD=1.52; Conservative foundations Mean=2.37, SD=1.23;  $t(484)=16.12$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

