ANTI-ATHEISM IN THE UNITED STATES

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Bremen,
Meinen Eltern, die mehr zu dieser Arbeit beigetragen haben, als sie glauben

* 

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The Second Coming of the Anti-Christ—World War II and the Holocaust .................................................... 89
Scaring the Reds—Communists and Anarchists .............................................................................................. 92
The Hot War—McCarthyism .......................................................................................................................... 96
America’s Most Hated Minority—Courts for the Separation of Church and State ....................................... 101
Atheist Religions—The Counterculture and its Spirituality .......................................................................... 107
In the Image of God—The Civil Rights Movement ....................................................................................... 108
Warring Culture—The Religious Fight against Diversification ..................................................................... 114
Doing God’s Work—The Christian Anti-Abortion Terrorism ........................................................................ 118
A Raid against the Unbelievers—The Terror Attacks of 9/11 .................................................................... 124
The End of Tolerance—The Rise of New Atheism ....................................................................................... 130
Civilizing Religion—Thanks, Obama! ............................................................................................................ 136
The Trump of the Religious—The 2016 Election and Religious Continuities .............................................. 144
Beyond the End of History—Anti-Atheism in the United States ................................................................ 149
STUDYING DATA WITH SENSITIVITY AND REFLEXIVITY ........................................................................ 159
Grounding Theory in Data ............................................................................................................................. 159
Research Question, Literature Review and Sensitizing Concepts ................................................................ 160
Interviewing and Transcription ..................................................................................................................... 163
Data Analysis, Interpretation, and Coding ...................................................................................................... 165
Theoretical Sampling, Research Contexts and Sample Description ............................................................ 168
Theorizing, Saturation and Generalizability ................................................................................................... 170
Personal Data and the Protection of Privacy ................................................................................................. 172
Presentation ..................................................................................................................................................... 172
ANALYZING ANTI-ATHEISM .......................................................................................................................... 175
Drawing the Line—Delineations and Definitions of Atheists ........................................................................ 177

“An atheist, I thought, didn’t believe in a god.” ............................................................................................. 178

“All these different ways to trap people” ..................................................................................................... 178

“The lukewarm mist” ................................................................................................................................... 180
“We are all God’s children.”

“Someone to be anti-, opposed to..."

“He’s not believing in the Buddhists and he’s not believing in any other deity.”

“I had cold chills ‘cause I’d never heard anyone say that out loud.”

Denying the Denier—To Explain Them Away

“I don’t think there’s no such thing.”

“People pissed at God and people that are not pissed at God.”

“There are no atheists in the foxhole.”

“Because they’ve been hurt”

“Never have I heard an atheist say, ‘Well, I used to believe in God.’”

Living After Life—The Fear of Hell and the Risk of Doubt

“You have to understand each doctrine and believe every piece of it.”

“If you deny it, well, here’s what you’ve asked for.”

“Believe in what you believe.”

“The atheist has everything to lose.”

Believing in the Power of a Higher Power—Authoritarianism

“Absolute truth,” “Satanic influence,” and “Good” or “Evil”

“How to behave in society”

“God is all authority.”

“That’s just one of our tough edges that God is still molding.”

“God permits things to happen for reasons that we can’t understand.”

Explaining God and the World—The Problem of Theodicy

“The Lord will not protect you from something he can use to perfect you.”

“As far as I was concerned, He was there.”

“You kicked him out. See what happens.”

“That’s us being humans and failing. That’s not God’s character.”
“I knew the Lord would send somebody.”

She “wouldn’t really have any of those desires to [...] help and change if she was not a Christian.”

“That life is ruined and it’s because there are those that don’t know.”

“All things work together for good to them that love the Lord.”

Painting a Picture—Ascriptions to Atheists

“At the end of the day, they still respect each other.”

“No judgement. Just, you know...”

“That’s a group that is very difficult to work with.”

“If there’s no God then there’s no reason for morality.”

“Language” and “Lifestyle”

“Extreme immorality, free living”

“They’re pushing agendas on children in school.”

Treating Them—Attitudes towards Atheists

“The last minority it’s ok to discriminate against”

“I look down on them”

“And no! She’s not allowed to date my son!”

“I just don’t think a nonbeliever would want to join.”

“To take some of that language out”

“Bible says ‘Love thy enemy as thy self.’”

“I’m also filled with compassion for them instead of anger and judgmentalism.”

“I ask them daily.”

“It’s going to continue to knock heads with a secular society.”

A Grounded Theory of Anti-Atheism

ANTI-ATHEISM IN AMERICAN HISTORY AND PRESENT

REFERENCES
INTRODUCING ANTI-ATHEISM

Around the year 1920, German sociologist and historian Max Weber traveled through the United States. On the train one day, he met a fellow traveler selling undertaker’s hardware. When Weber steered the conversation to the topic of religion, the salesman told him:

Sir, for my part everybody may believe or not believe as he pleases; but if I saw a farmer or a businessman not belonging to any church at all, I wouldn’t trust him with fifty cents. Why pay me, if he doesn’t believe in anything? (as cited in Weber s.a. [1906])

The story stems is from Weber’s article The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism. Along with his famous thesis about the Protestant Ethic and its impact upon the emergence of capitalism, Weber wrote another text about his observations in the United States, in which he describes how religious sects provided their members with credit and credibility by allowing them to join only after intense inquiry about their belief and conduct. In his time, he saw the impact of the sects shrinking, as secular clubs and fraternities were replacing them (Weber s.a. [1906]). I cannot discuss here whether Weber was right with his theory of secularization, nor if the recruiting mechanisms alone made the sect members so trustworthy. But triggered by Weber’s observation, the question which I explore, is how the image of those who do not belong to a sect, church, or religion has evolved since.

Historically, the United States is a religiously diverse country. Partly founded by religious dissenters, the “New World” was seen as a place, where everybody could worship as they wished—as long as they worshiped a god or a higher being. Despite the separation of church and state, this exclusion of atheists has carried over to political life as well. French political scientist and historian Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in his work Democracy in America.
In the United States, when a politician attacks a sect, it is not a reason for even the partisans of that sect not to support him; but if he attacks all sects together, each one flees from him, and he remains alone. (Tocqueville 2010:475–476)

The Constitution prescribes in Article 6: “[N]o religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.” (Constitution of the United States 1787:Art. 6) And the First Amendment states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” (Constitution of the United States 1787:Amd. I) But the law has often explicitly excluded those who do not believe from those protections. Some state constitutions explicitly forbid nonbelievers from holding office. The Texas Constitution’s Bill of Rights, for example, states:

No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office, or public trust, in this State; nor shall any one be excluded from holding office on account of his religious sentiments, provided he acknowledges the existence of a Supreme Being. (Constitution of Texas 2015)

Although this discrimination of atheists has been overruled by the Supreme Court, it is still virtually impossible for an openly atheist candidate to win an election. Surveys from 2016 show that only 58% of Americans would vote for an atheist, compared to over 90% who would vote for a Catholic or a Jew and over 80% who would vote for a Mormon. Even Muslims, who face rampant discrimination since 9/11, were still more popular than atheists (McCarthy 2015). Or, as former president Richard Nixon once put it,

There is only one way that I can visualize religion being a legitimate issue in an American political campaign. That would be if one of the candidates for the Presidency had no religious beliefs. (as cited in LeBeau 2003:67)

Religion also plays an outsized part in national symbolism. Dollar notes bear the imprint “In God We Trust” and the Pledge of Allegiance contains the passage “One Nation, under God”—which was ruled consistent with the Constitution following several legal battles (Newdow vs Lefevre [2007]). Despite the constitutional ban on establishing religion, about two thirds of Americans consider America a Christian nation (Pew Research Center 2006:5; Straughn and Feld 2010:280).

But as I will show, politics and the law are not the only field in which atheists are excluded: People also would not like them to marry into their families and keep some distance. They
associate atheists with criminal behavior from drug use and theft to rape and murder. Some believe atheists and secularists are responsible for tragedies like school shootings, even for terror attacks in the name of religion. Despite those perceptions and prejudices, many religious people insist that they “love” atheists anyway, and almost all want to bring them around to their belief. My work refers to these issues as anti-atheism. According to the historian Kenneth Sheppard, who studied anti-atheism in early modern England, anti-atheism targets atheism in a “learned” and in a “practical” form, which means that it does not just “confute” the atheist argument but also criticizes the atheists’ desire “to live [they] pleased in the present world without any regard for God’s judgement” (Sheppard 2015:4). Those two aspects are still important features of anti-atheism and they both will be addressed in this work. In addition, I want to show how also contemporary research about religion and nonreligion is still influenced by the religious and anti-atheist scholarship of the past.

Atheists and the nonreligious have come into the focus of academic disciplines rather slowly. It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that scholars of religion started to become interested in the so-called “Religious Nones” (Vernon 1968), namely people who do not report a religious affiliation. In recent years, there has been a growing scientific interest in those among the “Nones” who not only report no religious affiliation but who identify themselves as atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, as secular or irreligious. So far, this research has focused primarily on the nonreligious and their relationship towards religion—if they are, for example, indifferent towards religion or anti-religious (see Campbell 1971; Lee 2012b; Quack 2014).

The other side of this relationship—the way religion relates to nonreligion or atheism and religion’s impact on their lives and chances—is usually ignored. That hints at a systemic bias, which the study of the nonreligious has inherited from the study of religion: Typically, definitions of religion—no matter if functional, substantive, or working with dimensions—describe religion exclusively or primarily through its meaning for believers, practitioners or adherents of religions. Sociological classic Émile Durkheim, to give just one example, defines religion as a

unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them. (Durkheim 1968:47)

In such a view, religion is defined for its adherents, which it binds together in a group. What religion might mean for the “rest” of society, especially for the nonreligious and religious
INTRODUCING ANTI-ATHEISM

nonconformists, remains a blind spot in this understanding of religion (Klug 2015). As a result of this common omission, also most of the approaches to the study of nonreligion define their subject through its relation toward religion—but ignore the opposing perspective.

However, in order to understand the varieties of nonreligion—and especially its critique of religion—we need to also consider the societal background in which it emerges, and therefore consider religion’s relation toward the nonreligious and toward atheists (Zuckerman 2012; Klug 2017a). This becomes immediately apparent in the terms, which we apply to the studied phenomena. Only in a context where religion or theism are the norm, do negative semantic constructions like atheism and nonreligion make sense. Therefore, my work is based on a broader understanding of religion—one that includes that religion is a cultural set of beliefs, norms, and practices in regard to a transcendent being or principle, which is held by a particular segment of society but may be applied to all through sanctions, according to its societal influence. Such an approach allows us to study religion not only in its meaning for adherents, but in its impact on society and culture as a whole, including the nonconformists and the nonreligious.

In this work, I will give an overview of the discourse surrounding atheists and the nonreligious throughout American history with a special focus on the present. I start out with a review about how atheism and nonreligion have been studied in sociology and the study of religion. Combining previous theoretical approaches to the study of nonreligion and complementing them with the reverse perspective, I develop a new model for understanding the relationship of religion and nonreligion towards one another and point to the missing part—the way atheism and nonreligion are constructed through the religious society as an other. In the third chapter, I trace this perspective through over 400 years of American history, from the colonization of the continent to the present and ongoing entanglement of religion and politics. The fourth chapter describes my method of building theory out of data, my sampling and interviewing, as well as how my interviews were analyzed. Most of the scarce research that touches on the way atheists are perceived is based on the atheists’ discrimination accounts and therefore gives little insight about the topics and terms used by religious people. Where religious people were asked, research remains largely quantitative and therefore depends on the researchers’ pre-concepts. Instead, I asked religious people how they think and feel about atheists and reconstructed the latent meaning in their answers. People told me who is an atheist to them, what they think atheists are like, and how atheists differ from believers. They described their fears and their strategies to bring atheists back into the fold. In this way grounded in data, the empirical part in the fifth chapter gives an overview of typical delineations between believers and atheists, lists a number of
assumptions about atheists, and analyzes what kinds of socio-psychological mechanisms they rest on. In my analysis, I reconstruct what anti-atheism tells us about religion, and what kind of attitudes towards atheists follow from that. Finally, the summary brings together the historical and present aspects of anti-atheism in the United States, and concludes with a broader outline of these concepts and their significance for the American society as a whole.
TOWARDS A NEW APPROACH FOR STUDYING RELIGION AND NONRELIGION

So far, almost no research has been conducted about the forms, the content, and the motives of anti-atheism among the religious. As I’ve laid out in the introduction, this is not a coincidence but the result of a blind spot in our definitions of religion. In this chapter, I will give a short overview about the development of the study of the nonreligious and lay out how the typical understanding of religion has translated into a variety of one-sided approaches to the study of the relationship between religion and nonreligion. Furthermore, I’ll develop a new model for studying religion and nonreligion in relation to one another, which is able to include the religious’ relation towards and impact upon the nonreligious and therefore also anti-atheism.

The Denial of Nonreligion among the Classics

As the complaints about the depravity of the masses belonged to the repertoire of religious virtuosos from time immemorial, the discussion about religious faith and its others, about belief and unbelief, about religion and the irreligious, about indifference, apostasy, and heretics, is as old as institutionalized religion in the United States itself (McKnight Nichols and Mathewes 2008). Here, I will focus not on theology, but exclusively on the scientific and sociological study of nonreligion. But as will become clearer in the course of the work, the normative quality of religion does not always allow for a clear distinction between normative and non-normative or scientific and religious approaches.

Until the late 1960s, few scientists were interested in nonreligion, atheism and related phenomena. It was seen as a rare and abnormal condition, and as a result one of the few early articles about it appeared 1932 in the Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology (see Vetter 1932). But overall, the topic was largely ignored, and remained so for some time (Vernon 1968). In addition to some historical studies about the Freethought-Movements (Demerath and Thiessen 1966; Demerath 1969), one of the most interesting early works about the topic stems from religion scholar Martin E. Marty. In his 1961 book The Infidel, he showed how the churches in the United
States from the 1740s to the end of the 19th century used the image of the infidel as a “scarecrow” (Marty 2012 [1961]:202), in a fight that was less about the infidel itself than about the relation between the church and the state. “The ‘Orthodox’ were often the most effective vanquishers of infidelity. They conjured up the image of the infidel as a contrast to their own position.” (Marty 2012 [1961]:15) In the 20th century, he states, the image of the infidel became useless for churches, as religion has become a matter of mores, while at the same time churches had to adjust to a voluntarist and theologically diverse model of religiosity. Instead, new terms became prominent in the debate: secularism and materialism, accompanied by atheism and agnosticism (Marty 2012 [1961]:193).

In Marty’s next work, his focus shifted from the religious instrumentalization of the term infidelity to the Varieties of Unbelief. He acknowledges “that we may make of the term ‘unbelief’ pretty much what we desire, depending upon the definitions of belief and the immediate practical intention of the argument.” For the American context, Marty gives a “Christian Definition of Unbelief” as “any kind of serious or permanent departure from belief in God (as symbolized by the term ‘Trinity’) and from belief that God not only is but acts (as symbolized by the historic reference ‘Incarnation’).” (Marty 1964:31–33) The variety of unbelief in relation to this definition then ranges from anomie and nihilism to atheism, paganism and pantheism, to syncretistic belief systems and variations of Christianity.

Marty also criticizes the attempts to deny the subject of unbelief through the use of very narrow definitions and specialized terminologies (Marty 1964:27–30). In his 1964 book, he mentions the work of theologians like Josef Pieper and Arthur A. Cohen. But examples for this denial through definition were also found among of the classic sociologists of religion in the 20th century. In 1969, the Secretariat for Nonbelievers in the Catholic Church—established under Pope Paul VI in order to deal with atheism and to promote dialogue (Catholic Culture Dictionary s.a.)—sponsored a symposium, where next to Marty himself, such prominent sociological scholars as Peter L. Berger, Thomas Luckmann, Robert N. Bellah, Charles Glock, Bryan Wilson, and Talcott Parsons discussed about The Culture of Unbelief (Caporale and Grumelli 1971).

The way in which three of the classic interpreters of American Religion—Luckmann, Parsons, and Bellah—discussed the notion of unbelief, is crucial not only to the understanding of different approaches to the matter of unbelief, but for understanding American religion and how it relates to its other. Thomas Luckmann locates unbelief in his broader theoretical concept of Invisible
Religion (Luckmann 1967), in which he conflates the notion of religion with the process of transcending people’s biological nature and therefore equates it with socialization and culture as such. He differentiates between different stages in human development: For archaic societies “the notion of unbelief would be entirely misplaced” as “there is no such thing as selective internalization—or refusal of internalization of the sacred cosmos” (Luckmann 1971:25). This changed with the emergence of the modern world and the institutional specialization of religion: Parts of the society became independent while the sacred cosmos obtained a visible location in the social structure (Luckmann 1971:28). Organized in this specific social form, the sacred cosmos was not internalized by all people in the same way. Some became religious specialists who defined religious norms; others internalized these norms in a more or less complete way. For Luckmann, it was only at this point in history that the notions of belief and unbelief made sense (Luckmann 1971:31). But in industrial societies there is no longer one official model of religion, and therefore unbelief is to be defined relative to several models—or “what is one man’s belief is another’s unbelief.” As society develops to a point where institutionalized specialization as the typical social form of religion is declining altogether, belief is undergoing change, and the notion of unbelief “is about to disappear entirely as a social fact” (Luckmann 1971:36–37). So while Luckman sees religion as a universal aspect of the human condition, belief and unbelief are bound to the institutionalized specialization of religion and therefore depend on this form. And as he sees this form waning, for him the notion of unbelief is not a fruitful heuristic anymore.

Similar to Luckmann’s terminological distinction between religion and belief, Robert N. Bellah, distinguishes between faith and belief: He portrays the identification of religion with the cognitive dimension—as in the term belief—as a Western singularity, which developed out of Greek philosophy. In the Bible, belief was of only minor importance, and other religious systems like Buddhism and Taoism developed without this rational component at all. Furthermore, not to believe was for a long time an exclusively intellectual problem (Bellah 1971:40). While beliefs might disappear with the expansion of mass education, faith will not: “The effort to maintain orthodox belief has primarily been an effort to maintain authority rather than faith. […] When new, less authoritarian modes of social control become established, however, faith does not necessarily disappear.” Therefore, Bellah concludes, “that religion is a part of the species life of man, as central to his self-definition as speech” (Bellah 1971:44–46). The shift from a more externally driven understanding of religion, from authority and from classical religious systems towards a more inner version of religion, is for Bellah not necessarily one of secularization or
privatization, as religion can link an individual to a universal human community. This is interesting, because Bellah is also the one who, in his classical essay about Civil Religion in America, asks the question about the potential inclusion of the nonreligious in the American circle of the *we*: “There is no formal creed in the civil religion. We have had a Catholic President; it is conceivable that we could have a Jewish one. But could we have an agnostic president? Could a man with conscientious scruples about using the word ‘God’ the way Kennedy and Johnson have used it be elected chief magistrate of our country?” Bellah concludes that the “whole God symbolism requires reformulation” (Bellah 2005 [1967]:52). As an answer to this problem, he blurs the systematic distinction between religious and nonreligious worldviews. For him “[i]t is no longer possible to divide mankind into believers and nonbelievers,” as he sees the Holy Spirit also in groups that are not Christian, like the Peace Corps (Bellah 1971:52). So in order to line up his concerns with his positive notion of religion, he declares the nonbelievers as religious just through their humanity and engagement.

Talcott Parsons, finally, gives that a historical framework: He differentiates between belief, disbelief and unbelief. Believers he calls the members of the various denominations and of the civil religious moral community (Parsons 1971:224). Disbelievers he defines as “the revolutionaries who basically challenge the moral legitimacy of modern societal communities, and commit themselves to their overthrow.” And unbelievers he calls “those who, though not actively combating such communities, are alienated from them and seek to minimize participation” (Parsons 1971:229). Parsons then describes secularization as the inclusion and the upgrading of formerly excluded groups and even disbelievers: The reformation has challenged Catholicism, but by now they both live together in “Ecumenicism.” The materialist, scientific and rational philosophies challenged religion as a whole, but by now live together with religion in a new “religio-secular ecumenicism.” They have come to include non-rational elements or are, like Marxism, a materialist version of the Christian eschatological myth. So, for Parsons, “secular humanists in this sense are not even believers in the ‘faith of their own choice.’ At the level of the moral community and civic religion, however, they must be accorded the status of believers.” (Parsons 1971:226–228)

So, as all three of these important scholars viewed some sort of religion as being universal within humanity, examining “unbelief” for them required a terminological shift in order to separate the two words, which led Peter L. Berger to state that these three positions “each in its own way,
tend to deny the very existence of the phenomenon under scrutiny” (Berger 1971:xiii, see also Marty’s critique 1971).

**Early Research Programs for the Study of Nonbelief**

At the same symposium in the Vatican back in 1969, two scholars took a radically different approach to the study of unbelief: They outlined concrete programs for the empirical and historical study of the exact phenomenon. Although their approaches have hardly any resonance in the current study of nonreligion, they already indicated the two very different research traditions, which exist parallel to each other until today.

As opposed to the functional approaches discussed so far, they both rely on a substantial definition of belief in order to define what unbelief is. And both of them distinguish between supernatural and other belief systems. Nevertheless, the way they approach unbelief in light of these distinctions differs dramatically: Charles Glock designs a huge international and cross-cultural research project for the study of unbelief. He distinguishes between super-naturalist and naturalist beliefs, and furthermore distinguishes objectivist and subjectivist versions thereof. He also wants to include theories like Marxism or Existentialism as belief systems in his study. Although unbelief can be stated from the perspective of each belief system on their own, his interest in a cross-cultural study would mean that unbelief would be “the failure to score as a believer in any of the four belief categories.” (Glock 1971:57) Later, his co-researcher Armand Mauss concentrated on religious unbelief and distinguished (similar to Glock’s (1973) dimensions of religious commitment) an intellectual, social, and emotional dimension of religious defection (Mauss 1973).

Bryan Wilson, too, uses a substantial definition of religion: He focusses his attention only on “faith in a well-defined supernatural order.” But he conceptualizes unbelief differently: For him “unbelief carries no absolute meaning. As a concept, it depends on some specifiable system of belief” (Wilson 1971:252). Instead of differentiating between different categories of belief, or dimensions of religious commitment, he focusses exclusively on those beliefs that are important for the society and have its support. Therefor he extends the meaning of the term unbelief to New Religious Movements as well, as they are the major groups that reject the standard model of religion. So for him, unbelief is not so much about the lack of belief, but about the relationship towards the dominant form of religion.
This means that there are two major ways to conceptualize unbelief and its relationship towards belief, which can be traced back to the very beginnings of sociological attention to the subject. The first possibility could be called a *residual* approach, as it defines unbelief as everything that is not belief. The second possibility is to define unbelief in regard to its relation to belief—or, the dominant belief—which is often called a *relational* approach. Let’s take a closer look at these different options and how they have reappeared in the study of ir- or nonreligion.

**Residual Definitions of Nonreligion and Atheism**

To define nonreligion through the absence of religion has a distinct tradition in quantitative survey research in the United States: Driven mostly by statistics and polls, scholars of religion started to become interested in a so far mostly neglected category: the so-called Religious Nones—namely people who check “none” in surveys about religious affiliation. According to its promoter sociologist Glenn M. Vernon, this label “provides a negative definition, specifying what a phenomenon is not, rather than what it is.” It is therefore a “residual” category, but one worth studying (Vernon 1968:219–220). Vernon also points out that answering “none” in a question of religious affiliation does not equate to nonreligion, atheism, or agnosticism, because of the respondents in his study 17.7% of the Nones believe in God, about 7% even without any doubts. Only about 50% answered that they did not believe in a God or that they think there is no way of finding out if there is one (Vernon 1968:222). But while this points to the necessity of differentiating between the absence of belief in God and non-affiliation with a religious community—a pair which is usually complemented with the behavioral aspect of religious commitment (Keysar 2014)—all of these can be described as residual categories, defined through absence or negative terms. Vernon criticizes the label “none” for the negative evaluation it carries and suggests calling them “independent” (Vernon 1968:229). But no matter what the category is called, and even despite the potentially negative connotations which definitions through absence imply, conceptually they are indispensable for the study of nonreligion. Through this residual approach, we’re able to determine the number of people who are not religiously affiliated, as well as the number of people who don’t believe in God or whose behavior is not influenced by religion. According to ARIS data for the United States in 2008, for example, 6% neither believed in God nor identified with or belonged to a religious group, 9.5% did not identify nor belong but still believed in God, but 1.1% belonged and identified with religion while not believing in God (Keysar 2014:7). In a 2015 Gallup poll 12% of Americans answered “no” to the question if they believed in God (Gallup 2017). And a study by psychologists Will M. Gervais and Maxine B.
Najle (Gervais and Najle 2017) suggests that the number of people who do not believe in God might be even higher if tested in a way that avoids the effect of anti-atheist stigmatization. Data collected with this residual approach is also comparable over time and over different nations. According to General Social Survey (GSS) panel data, the percentage of non-affiliated Americans has risen from 7% in 1987, to 20% in 2012, to 26% in 2016 (Hout and Fischer 2014:432; Jones et al. 2016:2), and the number of atheists in the United States is relatively low compared to other Western countries, as sociologist Phil Zuckerman has shown (Zuckerman 2007).

Because of this definition-through-absence, the terms ir-, a- or nonreligion, as understood in this residual approach, do not require definition. According to Merriam Webster, the prefixes a-, ir-, un- and non- all share the meaning of the term not (Merriam-Webster 2002:1; 26; 36; 57). If the terms under scrutiny are used in the sense of everyone who or everything that is not religious, this usage is in line with the lexical meaning of the respective suffixes and their function as logical operators. No matter what exactly we define as religion, nonreligion then would be everything that is left once religion is removed. Or in the personal form: everybody who is not religious.

This residual approach works not only for the term nonreligion but also for the term atheism. The dictionary Merriam Webster defines atheism as “a disbelief in the existence of deity” or “the doctrine that there is no deity” (Merriam-Webster 2002). So, the lexical meaning of the term atheist includes everybody who is not a theist. Polls usually show large differences between the numbers of people who report that they do not believe in a God and the percentage of people who self-identify as atheists. This might have many reasons: From not knowing the term to skepticism towards labels to the nonconformist status atheism has been attributed with through the historical domination of religion and its rejection of the nonreligious. As a result, people might not want to identify themselves with such a label. But on the level of scholarly description, the term is still valuable.

Another important term in the spectrum of nonreligion is agnosticism. An agnostic is defined as “a person who holds the view that any ultimate reality (as in God) is unknown and probably unknowable,” or “one who is not committed to believing in either the existence or the nonexistence of God or a god” (Merriam-Webster s.a.b). If we take not believing what cannot be known as not being religious, we can also include agnostics in such a residual approach.
Relational Approaches to Irr- and Nonreligion

The relational approach in the Study of nonreligion—although very similar to Bryan Wilson’s—is usually accredited to Colin Campbell’s 1971 book the *Sociology of Irreligion*, where the sociologist studied irreligious movements in Great Britain and the United States in the 19th and 20th century. Campbell develops a formal concept of irreligion, defining its subject through its relation towards the established religious orthodoxy of a certain time or place rather than as the absence of religious belief. For Campbell,

irreligion cannot be defined substantively in terms of identifiable beliefs and practices but only as a general form of response to religion, the content of the irreligious response itself varying as the content of religion varies. [...] More specifically, irreligion is 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. (Campbell 1971:21)

For the Anglo-American sphere, non-Theists would be the first group to think of, but Campbell warns us not to conflate the notion of irreligion with unbelief because this would reproduce the rationalistic bias of equating religion with belief or the cognitive dimension. “Irreligion, however it is defined, must refer to all aspects of behavior (belief, action attitudes and experience) in just the way religion does.” The sympathetic nonbelievers within or outside of the church should therefore not be labeled irreligious, because “the failure to believe is not necessarily any indication of hostility or indifference toward religion.” On the other hand, irreligious action can include minor acts like staying away from the church or swearing. The line, which divides irreligious acts from others, is awareness. People without awareness would be called unreligious, but in contemporary societies it is difficult to imagine that people without awareness of the dominant religion exist. Among the aware responses, hostility would be called anti-religious, and indifference a-religious (Campbell 1971:22–24).

One of the problems of Campbell’s approach is that he—here again, similar to Wilson—does not include any substantial definition of religion or irreligion in his model. Therefore, it is hard to distinguish between what Campbell calls irreligion and religious nonconformism, new religious movements, or immigrant religions. And this creates a problem in diverse and pluralistic societies such as the United States. Another problem is that he later defines hostility as “expressed
through the rejection of the claims of particular religious traditions” (Campbell 1977:342), which would render everyone hostile to religion, who does not believe in it and does not follow its norms.

Newer relational approaches usually focus less on the question of what the relation is directed toward and more upon the form of the relation itself—and therefore also leave the question of the definition of religion open. Although her subject and her definition are very similar to Campbell’s, sociologist and founder of the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network, Lois Lee argues for nonreligion as the “master concept” (Lee 2012b:129) in the field because irreligion “implies an out-group or non-conformist position.” She defines nonreligion as “anything which is primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion,” or “Non-religion is any position, perspective or practice which is primarily defined by, or in relation to, religion, but which is nevertheless considered to be other than religious.” Possible relations are not limited to indifference and hostility but include a wider range of attitudes, for example people who would like to believe but cannot (Lee 2012b:131–132)

Ethnologist Johannes Quack, too, argues for nonreligion as the main term for the field, but he defines it differently, because he wants to avoid clear-cut boundaries between religion and nonreligion (Quack 2014:447). For him, the term “denotes phenomena that are generally not considered religious but whose significance is more or less dependent on religion” (Quack 2014:439). He sees as given “that ‘nonreligion’ should obviously not be used to denote everything that is not religious.” Therefore, he suggests a differentiation between the terms nonreligious and areligious, in which areligious phenomena are described without a relation to religion, while such a relation is required in order to call something nonreligious. He proposes another “master concept” (Quack 2014:445–447) in which he conceptualizes the relationship between religion and nonreligion in terms of a field approach, inspired by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s works on the religious field (e.g. Bourdieu 1991): Quack sees the religious field being surrounded by a religion-related field (Umfeld). The religious field “comprises all phenomena commonly understood to be religious in a specific socio-historical context, for example aspects of belief, behavior, and belonging attributed to religion or religions by the people being researched.” The “religion-related field includes all phenomena that are considered to be not religious (according to the constitution of a concrete object of inquiry, a larger discourse on ‘religion,’ or according to a certain definition of ‘religion’), while at the same time they stand in a determinable or relevant
relationship to a religious field” (Quack 2014:448–450). Similar to the different “Modes of Religiosity” (Berner 2004), there are different modes in which people or institutions relate to religion. Examples would be criticism of religion or the provision of functional equivalents like life-circle rituals.

Towards a New Approach to the Study of Religion and Nonreligion

In this study, I am interested in the relationship between people who are religious and people who are not religious. As this requires elements of both, the relational and the residual approach, I developed a new approach, which combines the strengths of the two and tries to avoid some of their weaknesses.

One of the strengths of the residual definition is that it does not limit the category of nonreligion to certain culturally specific types of relations toward religion. There are, for example, people who label themselves as nonreligious, atheist, secular, and the like, as well as people who never thought about a label for themselves, or reject labels entirely. There are people who are “out” about their nonreligion, as well as people who hide it completely or in certain contexts of their lives. There are people who gather in groups in order to share their experiences and to criticize religion, as well as people who are indifferent towards religion.

The researchers Phil Zuckerman, Luke W. Galen, and Frank L. Pasquale in their book about *The Nonreligious*, point out the diversity among nonreligious and secular people. And they also showed the potential misconceptions that a lack of differentiation may produce: If studies compare, for example, the wellbeing of people who are active in a religious group with the diverse group of the “Nones,” they may come to the conclusion that religious people are better off than others. However, this fails to differentiate between people who are poorly socially integrated and active atheists with a positive worldview (Zuckerman et al. 2016:1–8). And such a distortion is not just an academic problem, but can extend into all kinds of fields, for example, when people in the military are judged according to their “spiritual fitness” (Zuckerman et al. 2016:128). Furthermore, Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale give the example of activities, which may not intrinsically be related towards religion, like shopping or joining a club, but may be of relevance, for example, when people restrict themselves to such nonreligious activities or when they occur on a religious holiday. It seems that the ways in which people are related toward religion are too many and too different for one to define what a meaningful relation is and for whom.
So, although it may seem paradoxical, I find the residual approach is suited best to show the broad variety of relations that the nonreligious may or may not have to religion. Instead of limiting those relations by means of a definition, it is able to include also relations of which the researchers or the researched are not aware of yet or which may not translate into directly observable opinions and activities, e.g., minority-majority relations, relations of power or the competition for people’s commitment and resources. Thus, a residual approach also prevents us from essentializing the nonreligious. Jesse Smith has observed that “much of an atheist identity is constructed in terms of what it is not” (Smith 2011:228) and—not surprisingly—this is being a theist. The substantialistic examination of a residual category is therefore theoretically misleading. This does not mean that it is impossible to build a positive worldview upon a nonreligious base—and Zuckerman has laid out some principles that can base such a nonreligious morality (Zuckerman 2014). Neither does it mean that nonreligion cannot be examined in its material expressions the way Lee suggested (Lee 2012a). But it means that one cannot reduce people and their multiple facets to their relation to religion. In addition, such a residual category is much closer to the everyday-use and makes research accessible to the broader public, as recently also Lee has pointed out for her new concept of unbelief, which is defined as a “generalized lack of belief in a God or gods” (Lee and Cotter 2018; Bullivant and Lee 2016).

For the study of anti-atheism, it is crucial to include also the relation of religion towards the nonreligious. Relational approaches have classified the nonreligious in a variety of types and mapped various possible relations of the nonreligious toward the religious, ranging from interest and selective appreciation, via indifference, non-indifference, peaceful coexistence, mimicry, to critique, and the so called “anti-religious” identities (Cotter 2011; Lee 2012b; Cimino and Smith 2007; Wohlrab-Sahr and Kaden 2013; Silver and Coleman, Thomas J. 2013; Bullivant 2012; Siegers 2017; Smith and Baker 2015). But just focusing on the behavior and the attitudes of the nonreligious leaves out the probably most important factor of what shapes this relationship and that is the impact of religion itself. Research has shown that people’s relation towards religion depends predominantly on their experiences with religion, and therefore to a not insignificant degree on religion and its role in society. Sociologist Steve Bruce states that strong expressions of atheism or agnosticism are more typical for religious cultures, and that indifference on the other hand would be more characteristic for a secular society (Bruce 2002:40–42). Bruce’s thesis is well supported by empirical and historical data (2002:45–103; Bagg and Voas; see also Bullivant 2012:100–101). Zuckerman shows that the differences between the irreligious responses towards
TOWARDS A NEW APPROACH FOR STUDYING RELIGION AND NONRELIGION

religion—much softer in Scandinavia than in the United States—“can be partly explained by the fact that religion is much more widespread and pervasive in the USA than it is in Scandinavia” (Zuckerman 2012:18). And my own research suggests that the experience of pressure, prejudice, or coercion leads to negative evaluations and a critique of religion. Indifference or even a positive relation toward religion, on the other hand, is bound to the perception of non-infringement on people’s lives and rights (Klug 2017a). So, when examining the nonreligious’ relation toward religion, we also need to include the relation of religion toward the nonreligious in the respective societal context.

As this is a very abstract way of describing this, I will try to illustrate my approach with the following, admittedly very simplified set of graphics: Figure 1 shows the residual approach towards the definition of religion and nonreligion. It might be used with different definitions of religion, studied in different dimensions, and there might be intermediate forms, which are not shown in the picture, but basically in this approach someone or something is either religious or nonreligious. Figures 2a and 2b depict different versions of a relational approach, in which the nonreligious are defined through their relations towards religion. In some approaches, a clear distinction between religion and nonreligion is not possible, as the circles overlap or the border is permeable.

In order to be able to study the relation between religion and everybody who is not religious, my approach combines the residual definition of ir- and nonreligion and the study of relations, as proposed by the relational approaches. But differing from previous forms of the relational approaches, I add the relation of religion toward the nonreligious. This results in a reciprocal approach, as shown in Fig. 3. I want to point out that the line between religion and nonreligion is permeable here too, because people can, for example, change their orientation. Also, certain institutional arrangements like the separation of church and state can be favored by both people
TOWARDS A NEW APPROACH FOR STUDYING RELIGION AND NONRELIGION

on the religious and the nonreligious side. One could add to that picture that religions also affect one another, especially when majorities stand against minorities. But as the focus of this work is on the relationship between religion and nonreligion, I will leave that out.

A reciprocal approach

Fig. 3

As this is a formal model, like in the other models introduced before, the definition of nonreligion still depends on what is defined as religion—as becomes especially obvious in a situation of religious pluralism. That makes the model applicable for different levels of the discussion, which need to be differentiated. On the emic level of the subjects studied, some people might define as religion only what they think is right, and call everything else superstition or unbelief. Others might define as religion everything they think of as irrational, as, for example, some rationalists who criticize alternative medicine as religious, although these practices share little with religion in its common understanding. My approach could be used for all of these cases as a heuristic tool, as well as, of course, for different definitions on the etic level of academic research.

Johannes Quack rightly pointed out that the scientific study of religion is entangled in these relations as well (Quack 2014:458–461). Using a reciprocal approach, one could add that not just the scientific study of religion but science in general is related to religion, as for example, certain scientific teachings are called a heresy by religionists and some scientists explicitly challenge religion for teachings that do not align with scientific knowledge. With this broad scope, my model is able to include structural mechanisms as well as identity building, and relations that depend on established power relations in a society. It is possible to apply it to the private, professional, cultural, and even political realm. And it can include legal, material, and symbolic dimensions.

23
A model will never be able to capture the complexity of the world entirely. What I am trying to do here is to provide a heuristic tool, which complements models for the relation of the nonreligious towards religion, with the reverse relationship of the religious impact on the nonreligious and the dependence of all those relationships upon the religious, cultural, and political context.

**Differentiating Relations**

With regard to the nature of the relationships between the two sides, one has to differentiate between direct and indirect relationships. Most previous studies focused on direct relationships, like criticism or conflict. But sociologist Jörg Stolz, for example, described the competition between the churches and the secular institutions as a *Silent Battle* (Stolz 2009). Although people’s actions are not directed towards the other side, they still have effects on it, and could therefore be called an indirect relation: If people build their network of friends around their cooking class instead of the church, they might not relate that to religion at all. Nevertheless, when many people do that, churches could be affected in terms of a loss of community or commitment. Similarly, nonreligious people could suffer from a lack of social relationships and infrastructure in areas where people tend to spend their spare time with church activities.

Furthermore, it might be important to differentiate between intrinsic and extrinsic relationships. Intrinsic means that a relationship is directed towards the other side, while extrinsic means that a conviction or behavior, which is not primarily directed towards the other side, is nevertheless bound in a direct relationship, for example, by criticism or by laws. I would consider it an intrinsic relationship, if someone is interested in people from the other side, proselytizes them or tries to make them change their behavior or belief, as it is the case with anti-atheism. An extrinsic relationship we find, for example, with homosexuality and use of women’s reproductive rights. Although these are not intrinsically related to religion but stem from the love for people of the same sex or the wish not to have (more) children, they are forced into a conflict with religion, as some religionists see them as a violation of religious norms. This dynamic also exists in the other direction, for example, when a secular state tries to limit the personal religious convictions of its citizens, like in the former Soviet Union. But not all interventions of the secular state are intrinsic. If, for example, the religious convictions of parents harm their children, the limitation through the state would be preceded by a violation of the children’s rights and therefore be extrinsic. The entire discussion about the role of religion in society unfolds here, and it becomes
obvious that relations between religion and nonreligion should never be studied out of their cultural and political context.

**The Missing Part of the Puzzle: Religion’s Relation to the Nonreligious**

And here we’ve arrived at the research void that this study is trying to fill. As there have been several works about nonreligion’s relationship towards religion, we need to take a closer look at the relationship of the religious towards the nonreligious. Or, as sociologists Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis, and Douglas Hartmann have put it:

> If we want to understand the symbolic logic of exclusion, we have to shift our analytical focus away from what members of marginalized groups (the “other”) share, and toward what members of those inside the boundary share—and what they imagine themselves to share. (Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann 2006:231)

Through the one-sided focus on the nonreligious’ relation toward religion, too little attention has been placed upon the reverse relationship. Therefore, my study will focus exclusively on the relationship of the religious towards the nonreligious.¹ The following graphic, figure 4, illustrates that. As the nonreligious form a minority in the United States, and the religious influence on politics and culture is pervasive, we can assume an asymmetrical situation, which is why the religion section is depicted larger.

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¹ It would be definitely worth studying the interaction process between religion and nonreligion as a whole in the future. But for the present work it seemed necessary to focus as much energy as possible on the part of the interaction that has not been explored so far.
The relations of the religious towards the nonreligious in the United States

Fig. 4

The impacts of religion on nonreligion are, of course, manifold, as well as the way in which the nonreligious experience that. I have already pointed out, that it only makes sense to delineate nonreligion or atheism in a societal context where religion is or was the norm. Furthermore, deviation is often not just seen as difference, but as a threat. And that has led to a range of anti-atheist expressions. The reports of atheists given in the literature show that some of them experience discrimination regularly and that these experiences can be painful and limiting (Heiner 1992; Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006; Foust 2009; Hammer et al. 2011; Cragun et al. 2012). Quantitative studies show that there exists a severe and historically persistent anti-atheist bias in American society (Stouffer 1955:32; Glock and Stark 1966:88; Filsinger 1976:238; Hunsberger 1995:113; Edgell, Hartmann and Gerteis 2003; Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann 2006:218; Pew Research Center 2006:5; Jones and Saad 2012; Pickel 2013:31). But because of their need for standardization and measurement, quantitative studies are limited to pre-formulated items and answers. They are very helpful for examining the correlations to demographic variables like religious affiliation, age, gender, education, and even political orientation, but the reasons for and the logic behind the negative evaluation of atheists among believers is hard to determine this way. Despite the alarming results that they show particularly in the United States context, to my knowledge, so far not a single qualitative study about believers’ views of atheists has been conducted. Edgell et al. interpreted the sporadic accounts on atheists in data gathered in a study about the perception of diversity in local contexts, and found that atheists are seen as self-interested and immoral, materialistic, or criminal (Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann 2006:225–228). They conclude that “Americans construct the atheist as the symbolic representation of one who rejects the basis for moral solidarity and cultural membership in American society altogether” (Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann 2006:230). But this can be only a starting point for investigating an almost untouched field of work.
We need to gain a systematic understanding of the content of stereotypes and assumptions about atheists, and the mechanisms through which those appear, are reinforced, or can be changed, as well as their basis for legitimization. We need to know more about the concrete concerns and fears that are connected with atheism. We need to explore the areas of conflict between the two sides, and find out whom the religious actually construct as their others. We need to understand the function of this boundary for the religious and for American society, and what the specifics of religious forms of power relations are. We need to know if religious biographies and personal contact with atheists are important, and how this is influenced by religious plurality or homogeneity. This study can only touch on some of these questions, but we need to start gathering knowledge about how atheists became “an embattled minority with an uncertain future in religious America” (Cimino and Smith 2007:413).
ANTI-ATHEISM IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Usually histories of atheism, secularism, and freethought in the United States start in the 18th century with the Enlightenment and the Revolution (see Marty 2012 [1961]; Rinaldo 2000; Jacoby 2005; Manseau 2015; Schmidt 2016). But by then the term atheist as well as the discourse about nonbelief had already gone through a long and multifaceted history. It went under a variety of names, and had been applied to various violations of norms, but it had established itself firmly as a denominator for deviance. The accusation of godlessness was frequently used by preachers and politicians (McKnight Nichols and Mathewes 2008), and has over the centuries shaped a societal circumstance in which actual atheism still is discriminated against and has gained the questionable position of being the ultimate form of nonconformism to religious norms in America.

In this chapter, I cannot cover in full the interplay between religion and nonreligion in the history of the nation. Instead, I want to highlight some key cases of how anti-atheism was and remains a pillar of American religious and political history. This enterprise will not amount to a linear, all-encompassing history of American religion or interestingly told stories about heroic historical figures. Nor is it a complete chronology or a well-crafted narrative. What I seek to do in this chapter is to examine how the notion of atheism has been used in selected eras and areas of American history in order to regulate society based on the norms of religiosity. This will make it necessary to read some historical documents against the grain in order to detach them from their common interpretation and to identify the underlying assumptions and norms concerning atheism and nonreligion.

But my work has itself inherited a certain religious normativity. As history is always written from a certain perspective, and as leaving a historical record was often a privilege from which the average people and the subaltern were excluded, religious meaning structures are inevitably ingrained in the language and in the terms we use. The dictionary informs us that the term atheism was known in Europe as early as 1551. It derives from Greek a- and theos, godless, and means “a
disbelief in the existence of deity” or “the doctrine that there is no deity.” Archaically it was used for “ungodliness” or “wickedness” (Merriam-Webster s.a.c). However, more interesting than its negative connotation is the fact that it is inherently formed as a negative term. As the prefix a- means “not” or “without” this suggests a lack or a denial. So, the term atheism alone establishes the phenomena as a deviation and through the same powerful determination sets theism as normative. This grammatical structure is mirrored in the terms infidelity, impiety, and irreverence, which are negations of fidelity, piety, or reverence, dis- or unbelief, which negate belief, as well as in irreligion, which indicates a lack or neglect of religion. As language has implications for the way people think and feel, this terminology alone transports a power structure, through which judgements are inscribed. Through the grammatical structure of those terms, deviation from the religious norm is labeled not in terms of its positive content but exclusively in terms an aberration. The religion of those who are in a position of power, and inevitably religion in general, are set as a norm.

However, terms which are not already framed as negative by grammar alone can also define something semantically as the breach of a norm. The term heresy, for example, is defined as “adherence to a religious opinion contrary to church dogma.” As the term stems from the 13th century, that often meant the “denial of a revealed truth by a baptized member of the Roman Catholic Church.” But it is also used more generally for “an opinion or doctrine contrary to church dogma” (Merriam-Webster s.a.m). As it is apparent in the last meaning, the term does not necessarily distinguish between religious or nonreligious nonconformism, between adherence to another religious dogma or the absence of religion at all. Instead, it delineates those who differ from a religious norm or a set thereof. As a result, the discourses about atheism and about religious nonconformism are inevitably intertwined. Originally, the term heresy stems from Greek bairein, which stands for the action of taking, choice or sect (Merriam-Webster s.a.m). That makes it clear that it can stand for any personal choice that does not conform to a religious norm. So, like the radical and the rebel, the heretic is used as a foil against which righteous religion produces itself. Here, it can be detected how the inherent logic of the different forms of theism produce ways of controlling and oppressing deviation. And that, again, points out that in order to understand the nonreligious, we need to examine the way religion establishes itself as the norm. The terms might be shifting, but the inherent power structure continues to the present attempts in religious and nonreligious studies to scientifically categorize, classify, and evaluate the ways in which people do not believe in God. The knowledge about “the atheist,” which was developed
through American history has caused varying but consistent discrimination and exclusion, which only begin to be challenged.

A Mission to Save—Colonizing the Americas

The history of the United States starts as a colonial project. Next to economic interests, the idea that there are people who are not Christians yet and who could be subjected to this faith played a crucial role in the complex motive structure of the colonists. Christopher Columbus, often called the “discoverer” of America—although he was actually searching for a passage to India—, describes the colonization in distinctly religious terms. Addressing the zealous Catholics King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in his journal, he wrote:

YOUR HIGHNESSES, as Catholic Christians, and princes who love and promote the holy Christian faith, and are enemies of the doctrine of Mahomet, and of all idolatry and heresy, determined to send me, Christopher Columbus, to the above-mentioned countries of India, to see the said princes, people, and territories, and to learn their disposition and the proper method of converting them to our holy faith. (Columbus 2003 [1492]:90)

It is telling that the idea of converting those people comes before their “dispositions” are actually known. Anything outside of Christianity was not considered a faith or a way of life in its own right, but much rather subsumed in the category of those who are defined through their difference to the Catholic Church. The term *catholic* means “comprehensive” and “universal” (Merriam-Webster s.a.h). This reflects the claim of the Catholic Church to set itself as totality. Given that claim, the fact that the Natives were outside of this all-encompassing circle created a dynamic towards its own termination. Being outside of an all-encompassing epitomizes something that is by definition impossible. The patriarchal notion of “saving savage souls” also became the legitimization for cruelties and enslavement. In 1775, the Franciscan friar Junipero Serra wrote a letter to the Spanish Governor Fernando de Rivera y Moncado in which he asked for punishment of Indians who tried to run away from the mission:

I am sending them to you so that a period of exile, and two or three whippings which Your Lordship may order applied to them on different days may serve, for them and for all the rest, for a warning, and may be of spiritual benefit to all; and this last is the prime motive for our work. (Serra s.a. [1775])
The legitimization for violent subjection under the religious regime in the missions was seen in the “spiritual benefit” for the subjected.

However, colonizing the Americas was also an enterprise that took place against the backdrop of a religious conflict in Europe, after the split of the Protestants from the Catholic Church. In the meantime, Europe had experienced a religious division, which pushed the continent into violence and war. Protestants one calls the members of the various Christian churches, which followed the principles of the Reformation against the authority of the Pope. The term stems from Latin protestari, from pro- forth + testari to call to witness and is etymologically connected to “one who makes or enters a protest” (Merriam-Webster s.a.t, s.a.s). This protest made for a centuries long conflict, in which the accusation of godlessness was used by both sides in terms of negativity and antagonism. When Martin Luther was condemned by Pope Leo X as a “heretic,” he responded by characterizing his adversaries as “impious and insensate.” The Papal Bull against him he called “the sum of all impiety, blasphemy, ignorance, impudence, hypocrisy, lying—in a word, it is Satan and his Antichrist” (Luther 2010 [1520]). In this listing, nonreligion—or “impiety”—is discursively connected to a number of directly antagonistic attributes, culminating in the term “Antichrist” as the ultimate evil.

These connotations were carried forward when the rivalry between the Catholics and Protestants reached the Americas. Already in the late 16th century, the English Reverend Richard Hakluyt mourned the Protestants’ lack of converts in the New World (Marty 1984:47). And King James I pushed colonization,

which may, by the Providence of Almighty God, hereafter tend to the Glory of His Divine Majesty, in propagating of Christian Religion to such people, as yet live in darkness, and miserable ignorance of the true knowledge and worship of God, and may in time bring the Infidels and Savages living in those parts, to human civility and to a settled and quiet Government…. (as cited in Pearce 1988:6)

The term savage implies that someone is “not domesticated or under human control” or that someone “is lacking the restraints normal to civilized human beings.” It bears the connotations of untamed, uncultivated, wild, boorish, rude, malicious and “lacking complex or advanced culture” (Merriam-Webster s.a.v). Infidelity here is meant as a lack of belief in the Christian God, and therefore connected to an immature and pre-civilized state. The distinction between religion
and nonreligion is described as the dichotomy between light and darkness, ignorance and true knowledge, savagism and human civilization. This dichotomy legitimizes the Godly mission to colonize and subject these people to a “settled and quiet government,” not even attempting to hide the inequality, which is established through this subjection. The infidel and savage Indian became the new other in relation to which the colonizers defined themselves.

The superior supernatural legitimized not only the colonization but also the extermination of human lives. In 1634, John Winthrop, the long-term governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, wrote to a friend, that the Natives “are neere all dead of the small Poxe, so as the Lord hathe cleared our title to what we possess” (as cited in Pearce 1988:19). The encounter with the colonialists massively diminished the Indian population. No matter if one calls that a genocide or not, it is clear that the self-perceived religious superiority of the Europeans had its part in it.

Nevertheless, Junípero Serra was canonized as a Saint by the Catholic Church in 2015. Native Americans protested and pointed out the brutality with which the missionary enslaved them. In an open letter the chairman of the Indios de San Gabriel, Andy Salas, asked,

Why […] would the Catholic Church even consider Father Serra to be a candidate for Sainthood? There is strong documented records attesting to the treatment of my people in the name of religion. Foundations of Christianity include acceptance, forgiveness, respect, unselfishness and grace. The legacy this man left behind was opposite of these ideals. We remember instead loss—not only the physical loss from disease and death but also of spiritual loss—the loss of our religion, our way of life, our dignity, our innocence… our culture. (Salas 2015, see also Amah Mutsun 2015).

Since the colonization, large parts of the “savage” Native Americans have (been) converted to Christianity (Minority Rights Group 2009). Those Native Americans who hold on to their religious traditions—sometimes despite their parallel Christianity—had to fight to be accepted as a religious minority. It was not until the so called American Indian Religious Freedom Act in 1978 that they officially were granted religious rights. This act acknowledged that past American policies often abridged American Indians’, Eskimos’, Aleuts’, and Native Hawaiians’ First Amendment-rights by laws that “were passed without consideration of their effect on traditional American Indian religions” (United States Congress s.a. [1978]). However, some of their traditions, for
instance a Native American boy’s right to wear long hair in a public school, are still not fully accepted (see United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit).

To Write Religious History—Saints and Strangers in the Early Settlements

As the first English colony, Virginia, founded in 1607, was under strict control of the Anglicans, it is surprising that the founding narrative, which became popular, was that of the religious dissenters, who fled the Anglican Church in England. In 1620, a ship disembarked not in Virginia but farther north, in what was about to become Plymouth, New England. The Mayflower Pilgrims and their journey might be the most iconic part of the early history of today’s United States. Those of them who went on this ship for religious motives were Separatists—Protestants for whom the break of the Anglican Church with Catholic rites and teachings did not go far enough, and who demanded separation from the church as well as the right to their autonomous congregations. When they left for the New World, they interpreted their journey in Biblical terms, seeing themselves as the New Israelites in a covenant with God, thereby forming the religious identity of the later United States like no other religious group.

Still on the ship, all male members signed the Mayflower Compact, where they described their journey as one for the glory of God, the advancement of the Christian faith, and for the honor to their king and country. They agreed to form a civil body of politics and pled submission and obedience to the laws of the new colony (Mayflower Compact s.a. [1620]). However, civil did not mean secular here. John Cotton, one of the most important theologians of Massachusetts, describes the system of the colony as a “theocracy,” which he found is “the best form of government, wherein the people that choose rulers are God’s people in covenant with Him” (as cited in Cobb 1968:169).

Individuals who explicitly did not believe in God are difficult to trace in this Exodus-story. But even among the Mayflower settlers, by no means were all “Saints”—the name the religious pilgrims gave themselves. The bigger part, called “Strangers,” were on the ship as “Merchant Adventurers,” which was the name of their company, as servants, or as people who were sent away from England (Marty 1984:58–60; Lindsay 2004). As England used the colonies as a

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2 The impact of this act is debated. While the symbolic dimension is acknowledged as important by many Native Americans, the actual enforcement, however, is insufficient Echo-Hawk, Foster, Lenny, Parker, Alan (2004).
dumping ground for unwanted individuals, not everyone was there willingly and even less so as part of a religious enterprise. William Bradford, many years governor of the colony, complained in his *History of Plymouth Plantation*,

that so many wicked persons and profane people should so quickly come over into this land [...]. And by this means the countrie became pestered with many unworthy persons, who, being come over, crept into one place or other. [...] So also many were sent by their freinds some under hope that they would be made better; others that they might be eased of such burthens, and they kept from shame at home that would necessarily follow their dissolute courses. (Bradford s.a.:II: 330-331)

The term *profane* derives from the Latin term *profanes* which is built from *pro-* before and *fanum* temple. So, the word means that something is secular or unsanctified in the sense that it is “not concerned with religion or religious purposes” or “not holy because unconsecrated, impure, or defiled.” But it also can mean that something is “serving to debase or defile what is holy,” that it is irreverent, obscene or vulgar (Merriam-Webster s.a.r). In this double meaning of the term—something that is not holy and presents a threat to the holy—the definition of what needs to be excluded and the reason why are inexorably intertwined. In Bradford’s view the “profane” was linked to wickedness and immoral behavior. The nonreligious were deemed “unworthy,” a burden and befoul of their religious project.

Although the Strangers were irreplaceable for financing the voyage and the welfare of the new colony, the history of the early settlement was written in order to show that “it was religious men that begane the work, and they came for religions sake” (Bradford s.a.:II: 330). With this Puritan influence upon both American history and today’s construction thereof, nonconformist individuals have been largely banished from the colonies and historical memory alike. This can be seen in the example of Thomas Morton. Morton and his companions were unwilling to live according to the rules of the Saints and established their own settlement. Although it was named Mare Mount, in historiography it is usually referred to as “Merrymount,” due to the Puritan condemnation of the behavior of its inhabitants. Bradford called Morton the “lord of misrule” and his project “a schoole of Atheisme”:

[A]fter they had gott some goods Into their hands, and gott much by trading with the Indeans, they spent It as vainly, in quaffing and drinking both wine and strong waters In
great exess [...]. They allso set up a May-pole, drinking and dancing aboute It many days
together, inviting the Indean women, for their consorts, dancing and frisking togheter,
(like so many fairies, or furies rather,) and worse practises. As if they had anew revived
and celebrated the feasts of the Roman Goddes Flora, or the beasly practleses of the
madd Bacchlnallans. (Bradford s.a.:II: 49)

He goes on to call the Maypole “idle or idol” (Bradford s.a.:II: 50), thereby associating the term
idle with idolatry. The term *idolatry* means “the worship of a physical object as a god” or an
“immoderate attachment or devotion to something” (Merriam-Webster s.a.n). But beside that,
Bradford’s condemnation makes it clear that his norms are not just about the right belief and
religious practice. Bradford uses the accusation of idolatry and atheism in order to condemn
certain forms of life-conduct in general. He finds fault in play, dance, alcohol and unregulated,
interracial sexuality.

Mare Mount was closed; Morton was deported back to England. His own work as a historian of
*The New English Canaan* (Morton 1967 [1637]), which included descriptions not just of the land
but also of the “Manners and Customs” of the natives, has for a long time not been considered
of value, although (or because) it offers critical evaluation of the colonists treatment of the
Native Americans (Kupperman 1977).

**Bound in a Covenant with God—Religious Persecution in New England**

Another crucial element of the classical American myth is the idea of a covenant with God. In
1630, a group of Puritans, similarly hostile to the remains of Catholicism as the Separatists but
willing to reform the church from within, arrived in North America (Marty 1984:62–66). Led by
John Winthrop they wanted to establish “a city upon a hill.” The phrase is taken from Jesus’
*Sermon on the Mount* where he tells his people that they are the light of the world (Matthew 5:14).
Winthrop, in his sermon, urged the unity of the group. The people have to be like one body in
Christ, “knitt together […] as one man,” each one having their place. Some are rich, some are
poor, but all must obey the same laws. Transgression is punished as it presents a threat to the
community and its covenant with God:

Now if the Lord shall please to heare us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire,
then hath hee ratified this covenant and sealed our Commission, and will expect a strict
performance of the articles contained in it; but if wee shall neglect the observation of these articles which are the ends wee have propounded, and, dissembling with our God, shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnall intentions, seeking greate things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely breake out in wrath against us; be revenged of such a [sinful] people and make us knowe the price of the breache of such a covenant. (Winthrop 1996 [1630]:47)

In this construction, the mere fact of arriving in the colony binds the individuals into a covenant with God, in which “strict” religious obedience is expected. This obedience includes the renunciation of worldly pleasures and the acceptance of one’s social status, thereby sanctifying the unequal power relations in the world and implicating that attempts to overcome them are against God’s will.

Moreover, the sermon implies that the inhabitants of the colony are bound collectively. The idea of a religious collective, together with the fear that transgression is punished by God, led to a fatal dynamic: If individuals follow their worldly and carnal desires, God’s punishment is brought upon all within the group. Therefore, it was only consequent that the Massachusetts’ Puritan authorities together with the righteous members of the community needed to oppress or ban dissenting and nonconformist people as heretics. In 1635, Roger Williams, often called the father of American Baptism, was banished. In 1636 and 1637, John Wheelwright and Anne Hutchinson were prosecuted because they questioned the importance of moral works for salvation in the Antinomian- or “Free Grace”-controversy. Around the same time, Thomas Hooker left the colony because of theological disputes with Winthrop. Catholicism and Quakerism were persecuted, too, with Catholics avoiding the Colony (Horvat 2006) and four Quakers being executed (Cobb 1968:217–220).

Later in the century, this paranoia (paired with misogyny) escalated in the Salem witch trials, where 20 people, mainly women, were killed because they were accused of witchcraft. The strictness of the church had overstrained many of the inhabitants, especially as the children of the colonists were born into this religious environment instead of actively choosing it. Additionally, the church lost ground to secular institutions, and the ministers lost support from their congregations (King and Mixon 2010). In this climate of crisis, the idea of collective responsibility was transformed into a strictly Manichean worldview in which only friends and foes exist, and where all middle ground is eliminated. Samuel Parris, Puritan minister in Salem
Village during the witch trials and father of some of the alleged victims of witchcraft, enforced this worldview in his sermons. Explaining that those who “war” against Jesus Christ are devils or the Devil’s instruments, he states:

Here are but 2 parties in the World, the Lamb & his Followers, & the Dragon & his Followers: & these are contrary one to to the other. Well now they that are against the Lamb, against the Peace & Prosperity of Zion, the interest of Christ: They are for the Devil. Here are no Newters. Every one is on one side or the other. (Parris s.a. [1692]:155)

In order to clarify what it means “to make war with the Lamb,” he lists a number of transgressions, including disobeying Christ or his laws and ordinances, fighting the gospel or not receiving it, or even hindering its course. And furthermore, of course, opposing the Holy Spirit, or doubting the deity and humanity of Christ (Parris s.a. [1692]:156–158). In a setting where absolute and collective obedience to the religious doctrine is seen as required by God, doubt, nonconformism, and opposition will be interpreted as a special threat to the community. As religious doctrine is intertwined with civil power, the institutions of the community become religious courts. Therefore, it is not surprising that the concept of blasphemy and various other breaches of religious norms were put forward in these trials: Rebecca Nurse, for example, was accused by Ann Putnam:

Because I would not yeald to hir hellish temptations she threatened to tare my soule out of my body: blasphemously denying the blessed God and the power of the Lord Jesus Christ to save my soule and denying severall places of scripture which I tolled hir of. (Ray et al. 2002 [1692])

Being found guilty, Nurse was hanged on July 19, 1692.

**Free to be a Christian—The First Steps to Religious Freedom**

In this rigid religious climate, the civil rights of atheists, non-affiliated individuals, and religious minorities were strictly limited, and deviance from the religious norm was persecuted. In Virginia, the Church of England was the established church and conformity was enforced. Church services were mandatory. Under Deputy Governor Thomas Dale’s *Laws Divine, Moral and Martial* speaking ill of the Trinity and “blaspheming God’s holy Name” were punished with the death penalty. For repeated cursing a “bodkin should be thrust through the tongue.” For disrespect
towards a minister the offender was whipped. Non-attendance in church and the breaking of the Sabbath also were severely punished (as cited in Cobb 1968:74–78). In Massachusetts, franchise was limited to male members of the Congregational churches “in good and regular standing” and members of religious minorities had to pay taxes that were used for the established religion. Heretics were banned and people who did not attend services were fined (Cobb 1968:169–177). According to historian Leigh Eric Schmidt, Benjamin Sawser, a soldier in Massachusetts who drunkenly had called Jehovah a “Devel,” in 1654 was sentenced to death. However, the convict managed to escape from jail before he was killed (Schmidt 2016:3).

In 1645/1646 a group of men around Robert Child and William Vassall complained in a petition in Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay Colony that English men who are not members of the established Puritan churches were barred from civil employment, were not allowed to hold office and had no vote regarding magistrates, captains, as well as other military or civil officers. When they demanded civil liberty and freedom for “all truly English” (Child et al. 2009 [1646]), in Plymouth, Bradford shut the petition down in an autocratic act (Sargent 2004:51) and in the Bay Colony, they were arrested and sentenced to pay heavy fines (Palfrey 1966:167–176).

The restriction of political participation to church members was not just affecting nonbelievers. Since 1635, it was required to report an experience of the regenerating grace, an indication that one belonged to those who were converted by God, in order to become a church member (McDowell 2012:5). As this restriction excluded from church membership and therefore from political rights all those who could not convince others of their conversion, it created a problem not just for those who came as non-church members to the New World but also for the children of the Puritans, and in the end for the churches themselves, as their membership rates were shrinking. In front of this background what later was called “Half-Way-Covenants” were introduced. They allowed baptized but non-converted people to become part of the churches (Encyclopædia Britannica 2014). The practice was promoted by the Congregationalist pastor Solomon Stoddard, whose rationale was to bring people in the churches, where they may prepare for their conversion. He advised his audience to actively “strive” and to “allow of no excuse.” If people would avoid everything that was in the way of their success and practiced everything that helps the process, if they spared “no cost” and “no pains” they “may be converted.” At the same time, Stoddard had nothing good to say about those who did otherwise:
There be but two sorts of men in the world, Godly and Ungodly. All ungodly men are utterly destitute of holiness; their natures are corrupted, they are servants of Satan, and live in a way of Rebellion against God. In this respect they are worse than the beasts of the Earth; their natures are superior, but they are more corrupt than brute creatures. […] They are enemies to the authority of God, and to the wisdom, and power, and justice of God; yea, to the very being of God. […] A Swine that is washed is a Swine still. Some of them have a regular conversation; but a spirit of uncleanness, and intemperance, and prophaness, and atheism, and blasphemy is not mortified. That original sin that reigns in every natural man is the fountain of every abomination. Every natural man is over-run when the leprosy of sin from head to foot; has not one spark of goodness in him; all his faculties are corrupted utterly.” (Stoddard s.a. [1719]:85–89)

So, while the Half-Way covenants may have been a liberalization in the criteria for church membership, it effectively strengthened the position of the churches and put more people under their disciplinary influences. Not reaching or, worse, not even seeking conversion was seen as sinful. But moreover, it was rendered animal-like and blasphemous, which turns the “natural” state of people into a punishable offense against the Godly order.

The 1697 Massachusetts Act against Atheism and Blasphemy ruled

That if any Person shall presume willfully to blaspheme the holy Name of God, Father, Son, or Holy Ghost; either by denying, cursing or reproaching the true God; his Creation or Government of the World: or by denying, cursing, or reproaching the holy Word of God; that is the canonical Scriptures contained in the Books of the Old and New Testaments […] shall be punished by Imprisonment, not exceeding six Months, and until they find Sureties for the good Behaviors; by sitting in Pillory; by Whipping; boaring thorow the Tongue, with a red hot Iron; or sitting upon the gallows with a Rope about their Neck; at the Discretion of the Court of Assize, and General Goal Delivery, before which the Trial shall be; according to Circumstances, which may aggravate or alleviate the Offence. (General Assembly of Massachusetts-Bay in New England s.a. [1697])

The term blasphemy derives from the Greek blasphēmein, and means “the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God” or “the act of claiming the attributes of a deity,” as well as “irreverence toward something considered sacred or inviolable” (Merriam-
Webster s.a.g). It is quite obvious that this leaves a wide variety of potential crimes that then can be prosecuted. It also implies that there is one specific idea about which deity is to be worshipped and what is the right way to do so. Not worshipping or “denying” God is strictly forbidden. Given the implementation of blasphemy laws, it appears that the religious nonconformists that fled from Europe to the New World sought religious freedom only for themselves.

Blasphemy laws were enforced until the mid 19th century, when the editor of the Boston Investigator Abner Kneeland, pantheist, abolitionist and feminist, was convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to three months in jail after he stated:

that God and Nature, so far as we can attach any rational idea to either, are synonymous terms. Hence, I am not an Atheist, but a Pantheist; that is, instead of believing there is no God, I believe that in the abstract, all is God.

And:

Universalists believe in a god which I do not; but believe that their god, with all his moral attributes, (aside from nature itself,) is nothing more than a chimera of their own imagination. (as cited in Papa and Hughes 2001)

Although today no longer enforced, blasphemy laws are still on the books in Massachusetts, Oklahoma, Michigan, South Carolina and Wyoming. Pennsylvania, as late as 1977, enacted a law that prescribed that an “entity name may not contain words that constitute blasphemy, profane cursing or swearing or that profane the Lord’s name.” When a filmmaker in 2007 was prevented from naming his company “Hell-Productions,” the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed a lawsuit and the law was ruled unconstitutional (ACLU of Pennsylvania s.a.).

Similar to the Puritans who came to the New World in order to escape religious persecution and then persecuted those who did not conform to their religious rules, the dissenters who were banished and established their own colonies still drew clear-cut religious boundaries. People who did not believe in God kept being excluded from the full enjoyment of rights. One example of that is Rhode Island, whose founder Roger Williams was one of the most important proponents for the separation of church and state. The famous 1663 Charter of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations grants “full libertie in religious concernements” but restricts that liberty to the
adherents of “the true Christian faith and worshipp of God.” In the charter, King Charles II explicitly respects that

some of the people and inhabitants of the same colonie cannot, in theire private opinions, conforms to the publique exercise of religion, according to the liturgy, formes and ceremonyes of the Church of England, or take or subscribe the oaths and articles made and established in that behalf.

He therefore declares that

noe person within the sayd colonye, at any tyme hereafter, shall bee any wise molested, punished, disquieted, or called in question, for any differences in opinione in matters of religion, and doe not actually disturb the civill peace of our sayd colony; but that all and everye person and persons may, from tyme to tyme, and at all tymes hereafter, freelye and fullye have and enjoye his and theire owne judgments and consciences, in matters of religious concernments, throughout the tract of lance hereafter mentioned; they behaving themselves peaceable and quietlie, and not useing this libertie to lycentiousnesse and profanenesse, nor to the civill injurye or outward disturbeance of others. (Charter of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations 1998 [1663])

The colony—it was stated—needed a “better capacity to defend themselves, in theire just rights and libertyes against all the enemies of the Christian faith” (Charter of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations 1998 [1663]). The document is remarkable in that it emphasizes the importance of religion as a private issue as opposed to a public imposition. Nevertheless, this freedom is limited to “true” Christians. That not only limits the freedom to Christianity, the term “true” also implies that there are false interpretations of Christianity. The obvious contradiction that lies between this restriction and the declaration of “full libertie in religious concernements” can be only resolved if one counts the non-Christians as those who do disturb the public peace in the colony.

And even colonies that for economic reasons needed to attract more settlers were not willing to accept the presence of nonreligious people. The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina, whose authorship is typically credited to John Locke, entailed a similar restriction in civil rights. The specifications on religion start by stating that “No man shall be permitted to be a freeman of
Carolina, or to have any estate or habitation within it, that doth not acknowledge a God, and that God is publicly and solemnly to be worshipped” (The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina 2008 [1669]:Art. 95). That means that atheists were explicitly excluded. However, because there were not enough settlers, the colony felt urged to tolerate non-Christians, too. It promised,

that Jews, heathens, and other dissenters from the purity of Christian religion may not be scared and kept at a distance from it, but, by having an opportunity of acquainting themselves with the truth and reasonableness of its doctrines, and the peaceableness and inoffensiveness of its professors, may, by good usage and persuasion, and all those convincing methods of gentleness and meekness, suitable to the rules and design of the gospel, be won ever to embrace and unfeignedly receive the truth; therefore, any seven or more persons agreeing in any religion, shall constitute a church or profession, to which they shall give some name, to distinguish it from others. (The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina 1998 [1669])

This arrangement is interesting not just in that it justifies the openness for non-Christians as a means for Christianization and, therefore, shows a rather instrumental approach towards religious freedom. With regard to the exclusion of atheism, it is also telling that even where “heathens” explicitly are allowed to create communities these communities have to take a religious form. So, despite the central role that the idea of total religious freedom played in these colonies, the laws still excluded atheists from enjoying it. The idea of religious freedom in America arose as the freedom to practice religion as one pleases. Not believing in God seemed to be the ultimate—and therefore unacceptable—challenge to the idea of religious truth.

One reason for that was the common assumption that religion, or more specifically its societal function in maintaining law and order through installing the expectation of reward or punishment in the afterlife, was needed in order to prevent chaos (Hutson 2008:54–57). Therefore, the fear that other people’s atheism would undermine the moral standards of society was sometimes even greater than the fear that the establishment of a religion would cause the persecution of dissenters. Locke states in his Letter Concerning Toleration,

those are not at all to be tolerated who deny the being of a God. Promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist. The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all; besides also, those that by
their atheism undermine and destroy all religion, can have no pretence of religion whereupon to challenge the privilege of a toleration. (Locke s.a. [1689]:36)

In this view, the belief in God is necessary for people to maintain moral standards, and therefore they were exempt from toleration and the grant of civil rights. This codifies the idea that humans are incapable of developing morals on their own and that religion is always required in order to guarantee moral behavior.

The exception to that rule was the *Charter or Fundamental Laws, of West New Jersey* from 1676. It demanded

That no men, nor number of men upon earth, hath power or authority to rule over men’s consciences in religious matters, therefore it is consented, agreed and ordained, that no person or persons whatsoever within the said Province, at any time or times hereafter, shall be any ways upon any presence whatsoever, called in question, or in the least punished or hurt, either in person, estate, or priviledge, for the sake of his opinion, judgment, faith or worship towards God in matters of religion. But that all and every such person, and persons may from time to time, and at all times, freely and fully have, and enjoy his and their judgments, and the exercises of their consciences in matters of religious worship throughout all the said Province. (The Charter or Fundamental Laws, of West New Jersey 2008 [1676/77]:Chapt. XVI)

The emphasis here is on the freedom of conscience in matters of religion, which can encompass religious as well as nonreligious views. Although assuming a “Lord” whose help was asked for, the charter does not impose the exercise of religion upon its subjects. However, this remained an exception. The restrictions in the other colonies were much severer.

Even the other Quaker-Colony, the “Holy Experiment” of Pennsylvania, actually required its citizens to “possess faith in Jesus Christ” in order to hold office. The freedom of worship was granted to those who believe in God. People were required to observe the Lord’s day and, next to murder and rape, “swearing, cursing, prophane talking, drunkenness, drinking of healths, obscene words, incest, sodomy […] all prizes, stage-plays, cards, dice, May-games, gamesters, masques, revels” were forbidden under severe punishment because they are “offences against God” and “excite the people to rudeness, cruelty, looseness, and irreligion” (Frame of
Government of Pennsylvania 2008 [1682]:XXXIV–XXXVII). This list shows that the social control that was grounded in the idea of God and his plan for the world was not just limiting in terms of belief but also in terms of other personal choices. Irreligion was bound to immoral behavior, and what was immoral was set by a religious norm. So while the actual policies in the new settlements might have been far more liberal than those of the early colonies, their civil systems were still profoundly based on religion, therefore rendering atheism or nonreligion illegal. Moreover, behavior that was not intrinsically related to religion, like gambling or homosexuality, was banned through religious norms, too.

Endowed by the Creator—The Declaration of Independence

At the time of the revolution most colonies were ready for more religious liberty, especially as the number of non-church members in some colonies exceeded the church members by far and the cooperation of Catholic Quebec against England was sought (Cobb 1968:482–490). Before, most colonies were ruled by established Protestant churches who “tolerated” some of the dissenting groups, which meant that they could legally worship but had to pay taxes that supported the state churches. Next to the nonreligious, in many colonies Catholics, Jews, Quakers and often also Protestant minorities were persecuted to various degrees by the civil authorities or the religious mob (Hutson 2008:47–93). But the individualized religiosity of the Great Awakening, the influence of the European Enlightenment, and the sheer numbers of people who counted as religious dissenters in their states, together formed a zeitgeist that was both anticlerical as well as anti-establishment (Lambert 2003:187–192).

When the Church of England sought to extend its power in America, this caused much protest in the colonies. The fight against religious impositions turned into the challenge of the British dominance itself (Lambert 2003:191–194). But even those who argued against the establishment, like Boston Pastor Jonathan Mayhew, defended their religious freedom with the argument that “there is no such monster as an Atheist known amongst us” (as cited in Lambert 2003:197). Here the righteousness of the dissenters’ religious intentions was proved through the demonization of the atheist.

This discrimination was also translated into the most progressive political documents of the time. “As to religion,” Thomas Paine, political activist and Founding Father of the United States, wrote in his revolutionary pamphlet Common Sense in 1776:
I hold it to be the indispensable duty of every government, to protect all conscientious
professors thereof, and I know of no other business which government hath to do
therewith. Let a man throw aside that narrowness of soul, that selfishness of principle,
which the niggards of all professions are so unwilling to part with; and he will be at once
delivered of his fears on that head. Suspicion is the companion of mean souls, and the
bane of all good society. For myself, I fully and conscientiously believe, that it is the will
of the Almighty, that there should be a diversity of religious opinions among us: it affords
a larger field for our Christian kindness. Were we all of one way of thinking, our religious
dispositions would want matter for probation; and on this liberal principle, I look on the
various denominations among us, to be like children of the same family, differing only, in
what is called, their Christian names.” (Paine 2012a [1796]:s.p.)

Here we can trace the two most remarkable aspects of the American version of religious
freedom: First, religion is only protected if it is “conscientious” in its profession, which means
that the exercise of religion is protected, but not necessarily the lack thereof. This also is obvious
in the second aspect: At this time Paine, like many other American intellectuals, did not seem to
see any contradiction in the idea that the right to religious freedom is legitimized through a
reference to a God and therefore put under the most fundamental reservation possible for
atheists and non-theist religious minorities.

These paradoxes became incorporated in the foundations of the new republic, too. The Virginia
Declaration of Rights, which was drafted by George Mason and Patrick Henry in the struggle for
independence and adopted by the Virginia Convention in 1776, states,

That religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it,
can be directed by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore, all men
are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience;
and that it is the mutual duty of all to practice Christian forbearance, love, and charity
towards each other. (Virginia Declaration of Rights s.a. [1776]:Sect. XVI)\(^4\)

\(^4\) The draft that was finally adopted by the Virginia Convention was actually more liberal than Mason’s
first draft, as the latter actually did not include an entitlement to the free exercise of religion, but framed it
only as “the fullest Toleration in the Exercise of Religion according to the Dictates of Conscience,
Therefore, the document limits religious freedom to the “free exercise of religion.” It even imposes a “duty” towards a creator and to practice Christian mores. Not to exercise religion is clearly not protected by this document. The Virginia Declaration of Rights influenced many American legal documents, especially the Declaration of Independence, which was drafted by Thomas Jefferson—later President of the United States but constantly suspected of atheism (Hutson 1998).

The Declaration of Independence itself, although invoking “laws of nature” before those “of nature’s God,” still contains religious rhetoric. Although it is about the rights of men, “they are endowed by their Creator” with these rights. This ambivalence, the double authorization of their claims, continues in the last part of the Declaration. The representatives that came together in the General Congress appeal to the “Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of [their] intentions,” but they do so “in the name and by the authority of the good people of these colonies.” “With a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, [they] mutually pledge to each other” their lives, fortunes, and “sacred honor” (Declaration of Independence [s.a. [1776]]). Therefore, the underlying assumption of the Declaration was that a human claim—that of Independence from England—would be legitimimized in religious terms, and that those rights were endowed by a Creator. This is how fundamentally the norm to be religious was ingrained in the power relations of the time, even where they were expressed by its most liberal representatives.

The Age of God—Enlightenment as Deism

Paradoxically, the 18th century has been the century of the Great Awakening and of the Enlightenment at the same time. When in the 1740s some radical preachers like Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and Samuel Davies gathered new congregations and challenged the established churches, they caused an Evangelical revival throughout the colonies which laid its focus on individual choice and the personal experience of God (Lambert 2003:127–158). However, at the same time the idea of reason and enlightenment came to the continent from Europe. The most prominent of its religious realizations was deism. Assuming the existence of a

unpunished and unrestrained by the Magistrate, unless, under Colour of Religion, any Man disturb the Peace, the Happiness, or Safety of Society, or of Individuals” Mason (2011 [1776]).

5 The version that was approved by Congress is altered from that of Jefferson’s first rough draft but also in his original draft, he referred to “God” and assumed creation (see Jefferson (s.a.)).
God, but questioning Scripture and revelation, deism became a popular choice, particularly for the better educated among the colonists (Lambert 2003:159–179). There was some collaboration between these two new trends, for example between Benjamin Franklin and George Whitefield, whose sermons were regularly printed in Franklin’s newspapers. Franklin wrote that despite having no “religious Connection” they had a “civil Friendship.” And he admired the change in behavior that Whitefield caused among the settlers: “from being thoughtless or indifferent about Religion, it seem’d as if all the World were growing Religious” (Franklin s.a. [1909]).

However, oftentimes the two sides were highly skeptical of each other. The awakened Protestants saw Deists as infidels. Jonathan Edwards wrote for example:

> The Deists wholly cast off the Christian religion, and are professed infidels. They are not like the heretics, Arians, Socinians, and others, who own the Scriptures to be the Word of God, and hold the Christian religion to be the true religion, but only deny these and these fundamental doctrines of the Christian religion. They deny the whole Christian religion. Indeed they own the being of God, but deny that Christ was the son of God, and say he was a mere cheat. And so they say all the prophets and apostles were. And they deny the whole Scripture. They deny that any of it is the Word of God. They deny any revealed religion, or any Word of God at all, and say, that God has given mankind no other light to walk by but their own reason. (Edwards s.a. [1816]:347)

In a way, Edward’s characterization was not completely astray. Inspired by the writings of European philosophers and scientists like Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton and John Locke, Deists usually favored observation of nature over scriptural revelation, and the physical reality over speculative a-priories. They trusted in human reason, but they did not deny the existence of a God (Lambert 2003:162–167).

Paine—also one of the most influential Deist authors—wrote in his much debated and much loathed bestseller *Age of Reason* that he believes in “one God” and hopes for “happiness beyond this life” but that he does not believe in any the creeds professed by the churches: “My own mind is my own church. All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.” He does not condemn those who do believe in those churches, but claims the same right of belief for himself:
But it is necessary to the happiness of man, that he be mentally faithful to himself. Infidelity does not consist in believing, or in disbelieving; it consists in professing to believe what he does not believe. (Paine 2012b [1796]:Chapt. 1)

This intellectual disposition changed the criteria for infidelity from the disbelief in a dogma to hypocrisy towards one’s own beliefs. But the trust in one’s own reason, again, did not include the choice not to believe in God at all. In fact, the term atheism was a major insult for Paine. He even used it to criticize his favorite object of ridicule, Christianity:

As to the Christian system of faith, it appears to me as a species of atheism; a sort of religious denial of God. It professes to believe in a man rather than in God. It is a compound made up chiefly of man-ism with but little deism, and is as near to atheism as twilight is to darkness. It introduces between man and his Maker an opaque body, which it calls a redeemer, as the moon introduces her opaque self between the earth and the sun, and it produces by this means a religious or an irreligious eclipse of light. It has put the whole orbit of reason into shade. (Paine 2012b [1796]:Chapt. XI)

The debate between the Deists and the Evangelicals is reminiscent of the arguments between the Catholic Church and the Protestants, in that religious dissent is rendered irreligious. Atheism seemed to be the strongest stigma that could be attached to something in matters of religion. But while Paine claimed that he had “endangered [his life] by opposing atheism” during the French Revolution (Paine s.a [1803]), he himself was broadly discarded as blasphemous, anti-religious or atheist by his contemporaries (see for example Anketell 1795). William Cobbett, an English politician, who spent some time in the colonies, wrote in his biography about Paine:

He has done all the mischief he can do in this world; and whether his carcass is at last to be suffered to rot on the earth, or to be dried in the air, is of little consequence… . Like Judas, he will be remembered by posterity; men will learn to express all that is base, malignant, treacherous, unnatural, and blasphemous by the single monosyllable of Paine. (as cited in Jacoby 2005:36)

In fact, Paine, who was once celebrated as a national hero for his role in the American revolution, was now treated with hostility and almost shot in his own house in a rifle-attack. After he had died relatively poor and alone, he was denied a grave in a cemetery. Ironically, it was his
biographer Cobbett, who—after actually reading Paine’s books—had changed his mind and excavated Paine’s “carcass” from his farm in order to bury him in England (Jacoby 2005:61–64). However, neither did Cobbett actually do that nor did his change of mind rehabilitate Paine from the sticky accusation of atheism.

The Religious Foundations—Of the Godless Constitution

Given this firm reliance of American politics upon religious thought, it seems almost like a miracle that the Constitution does not refer to religion, let alone Christianity. It does not mention God or a creator. Instead, it starts with “We the People of the United States” (Constitution of the United States 1787:Preamble) and states explicitly “no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States” (Constitution of the United States 1787:Art. 6). However, the motives for the omission of God were not as nonreligious as one could think.

The prelude for the debate about the Constitution, again, took place in Virginia. Separation of church and state was first brought up by Thomas Jefferson, but rested until the end of the war. Then Patrick Henry, later elected governor, introduced a bill that would have replaced the establishment of the Episcopal Church through an establishment of Christianity in general (Rutland and Rachal 1973:295–306). This Bill Establishing a Provision for Teachers of the Christian Religion was opposed by the Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments, which was anonymously written by James Madison and spread by some of his friends. In reference to the Virginia Declaration of Rights and its rejection of the use of force or violence in matters of “the duty which we owe to our Creator,” the petition states that “The Religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate.” The tension between rights and duties is resolved here in the way that rights are expressed as duties to a higher, divine, authority: “It is the duty of every man to render to the Creator such homage and such only as he believes to be acceptable to him.” Madison is aware “that the majority may trespass on the rights of the minority” and that “that the same authority which can establish Christianity, in exclusion of all other Religions, may establish with the same ease any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all other Sects” (Madison 1973 [1785]:Art. 1-3).
However, although the document today is celebrated as a milestone of secularism, it actually does not allow that same freedom for nonbelievers. The idea of a duty to worship God is expressed in several parts. Madison writes that

> Before any man can be considered as a member of Civil Society, he must be considered as a subject of the Governour of the Universe. [...] Whilst we assert for ourselves a freedom to embrace, to profess and to observe the Religion which we believe to be of divine origin, we cannot deny an equal freedom to those whose minds have not yet yielded to the evidence which has convinced us. If this freedom be abused, it is an offence against God, not against man: To God, therefore, not to man, must an account of it be rendered. (Madison 1973 [1785]:Art. 4)

He even goes as far as to call the protested bill “adverse to the diffusion of the light of Christianity” and of a “ignoble and unchristian timidity” (Madison 1973 [1785]:Art. 1 and 12). Of course, leaving the judgement for any abuses to God is actually a convenient solution for those who do not believe in him. It is expressive, however, of the difficulties that the founders faced when it came to the religious freedoms of those free from religion.

The dominance of religious arguments for the separation of church and state is even more striking if one knows that at the time another petition against Henry’s attempt regarding the establishment of Christianity had almost three times as many signers. Its author, whose name is unknown till today, argued that Henry’s proposal not only violated the Virginia Declaration of Rights, but, what’s more, was in conflict with “the Spirit of the Gospel” (as cited in Rutland/Rachal 1973:295–306). Apparently, the most widespread arguments for the separation of church and state came from religious dissenters. Historian Thomas E. Buckley, who reviewed all the petitions against the assessment bill, did not mention a single one that argued out of an atheist perspective (see Buckley 1977:144–153). And historian Susan Jacoby concludes that only a few secularists had the courage to acknowledge that they were not just interested in the freedom of the different religious believers but also in that of deists and freethinkers (Jacoby 2005:23). Although many influential people of the time were quite liberal, outright nonreligion still was a taboo.

The result of the dispute was Virginia’s Act for Establishing Religious Freedom, which was legislated by the General Assembly on January 16 in 1786. Jefferson’s original proposal started with the
acknowledgement “that the opinions and belief of men depend not on their own will, but follow involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds” (as cited in Buckley 1977:190). But this part as well as one about the unrestrainable freedom of these minds were among those discarded by the committee. The final version starts with the words:

Whereas, Almighty God hath created the mind free; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burthens, or by civil incapacitations tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion, who being Lord, both of body and mind yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was in his Almighty power to do […] (General Assembly of Virgina 1786)

This was a powerful stance against the imposition of worldly restrictions upon the free will of people. However, the Act goes on to call such presumptions of legislators and church leaders “impious” and responsible for the establishment of “false religions over the greatest part of the world.” Thereby it links religious force to irreligion and religious difference.

But throughout the text the bill focuses not only on freedom of religion but also on freedom from religion. In regard to that it states,

Be it enacted by General Assembly that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief, but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of Religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge or affect their civil capacities. (General Assembly of Virginia 1786)

As opposed to the Declaration of Independence, the rights in the Virginia act are not endowed by a creator but are called “natural rights of mankind”—natural rights which are designed to be beyond the legal rights created by the lawmakers, who would try to infringe upon them (An Act for Establishing Religious Freedom s.a. [1786]). So, despite the fact, that the document assumes a creator and reserves for itself to call other religions “false,” it was an important step on the way to more religious freedom. Because the attempt to mention Jesus in the bill failed, Jefferson even took it as a victory for the freedom of believers and nonbelievers alike (Jacoby 2005:24), despite
its reference to the “Almighty.” The Constitution, by not mentioning God, a creator, or even a
divine principle or other reference to a higher power in its text, was only the final step in that
process of separating church and state.

The “godless” Constitution has been object of debate ever since and still there is no end to the
discussion about whether the United States were founded upon Christianity or upon secularity.
Part of that debate are speculations about the motives for the omission of any reference to God.
Historian Frank Lambert identifies a number of potential reasons: First, the delegates may have
held the view that religion was a natural right and therefore beyond the scope of government.
Second, they may have seen religion as a spiritual matter, about which authority rests with God
and not with men, and which is therefore outside of jurisdiction of the state in general. Third,
some delegates considered religion to be under the control of the states, not the federal
government—which would leave the authority to establish religion to the states. Fourth, some
thought that, because most Americans were Christians anyway, the establishment of Christianity
was not necessary. Due to its perceived superiority, it would always prevail. The explanation that
the true religion would not need force in order to be victorious was also held by many Deists.
Finally, the plurality of religion in the United States was a reason not to include it in the
Constitution. For many of the several small religious groups, establishing religion was offensive.
They did not want their government to get involved in religion (Lambert 2003:252). It is
impossible to decide which of these reasons—if any—was the most influential. However, it is
obvious that the secularism of the American Constitution was not just owed to the liberal
Founding Fathers but also to the religious ones. It was an alliance of Evangelicals, who wanted to
prevent governmental interference with their religious thought, and the Enlightened, who turned
away from religion more and more (Lambert 2003:263).

The United States Constitution is often called a secular one. The word secular comes from Latin
saeculum, which was used to describe the present world. With regard to religion, it means “relating
to the worldly or temporal,” to be “not overtly or specifically religious” or “not ecclesiastical or
clerical.” It also has the meaning of being “not bound by monastic vows or rules” or “not
belonging to a religious order” (Merriam-Webster s.a.w). In a simple view, secular it is often
understood as the opposite of religious, but paradoxically in the 18th century in America, the
experiences of religious persecution from religious bodies made the secular state most desirable
for religious dissenters. The metaphor of a “wall of separation,” was famously used by Jefferson
in his letter to the Danbury Baptists (Jefferson 1998 [1802]). But Baptist Roger Williams, who once was banned from Massachusetts for his dissenting views, wrote already in 1644 that only a “wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world” could make the purity of the church possible (Williams 2009:70). So, secularism during the time of the founding of America, was as much in the interest of the nonreligious as in that of the religious dissenters.

In the Constitutional Convention, the omission of God from the text was not controversial (Jacoby 2005:29). But in the ratification debates within the states, it caused discussion. Many commentators were critical about there not being a religious test in the Constitution: Amos Singletary, a delegate in the Massachusetts convention feared that “though he hoped to see Christians [in office], yet by the Constitution, a papist, or an infidel was eligible as they.” And Reverend David Caldwell from Carolina pointed out that the lack of a religious test was an “invitation to Jews and pagans” (both as cited in Lambert 2003:254–258). Nevertheless, the nonreligious and religious concerns that the possible establishment of a state church would endanger the own freedom prevailed.

The states demanded the addition of ten amendments, which form the Bill of Rights. The First Amendment grants the “Freedom of Speech, Press, Religion and Petition.” It states that

> Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. (Constitution of the United States 1787:Amd. I)

The two first parts are usually called the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause. There have been many debates surrounding questions about the original intent of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights as well as about their legal implications (see for an overview Levy/Karst/Mahoney 1990). Nevertheless, from the text itself, it becomes obvious, that while the right to exercise religion is explicitly protected, the right, not to do so, is not mentioned explicitly. Furthermore, the Constitution prevents Congress from establishing a religion, but the Tenth Amendment grants that “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people” (Constitution of the United States 1787:Amd. X). The states took that as a legitimation to
establish their own religious tests, which even today still often implicitly or explicitly discriminate against atheists. The constitution of Pennsylvania states that

No person who acknowledges the being of a God and a future state of rewards and punishments shall, on account of his religious sentiments, be disqualified to hold any office or place of trust or profit, (Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania 2011:Art. 1, Sect. 4)

and therefore implicitly allows disqualifying atheists. The constitution of Maryland states that no person shall

be compelled to frequent, or maintain, or contribute, unless on contract, to maintain, any place of worship, or any ministry; nor shall any person, otherwise competent, be deemed incompetent as a witness, or juror, on account of his religious belief; provided, he believes in the existence of God, and that under His dispensation such person will be held morally accountable for his acts, and be rewarded or punished therefor either in this world or in the world to come. […] That no religious test ought ever to be required as a qualification for any office of profit or trust in this State, other than a declaration of belief in the existence of God. (Constitution of Maryland 2012:Art. 36-37)

These clauses would not be overruled until the Supreme Court ruling in 1961 (United States Supreme Court 1961) and despite of it remain in the text of Maryland’s constitution and in that of other states. The constitutions of North Carolina, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Texas explicitly disqualify those who deny the “existence of a Supreme Being,” “the being of Almighty God” or the “being of God, or a future state of rewards and punishments” (Constitution of North Carolina 2008:Art. 6, Sec. 8, Constitution of the State of Tennessee 2014:Art. 9, Sec. 2, Constitution of the State of Mississippi s.a.:Art. 14, Sec. 265, Constitution of Texas 2015). The constitution of Arkansas additionally prevents a person “who denies the being of a God […] to testify as a witness in any Court” (Constitution of the State of Arkansas 2015:Art. 19, § 1). So while religious freedom was seen as one of the most precious achievements that the new union was supposed to protect, atheists were still excluded from civil rights. Religious freedom ended where it went beyond the rights of theists or Deists.

7 For South Carolina no official document was found.
Beside the Constitution, there exists another official document, which often has been used as proof for the non-Christian, nonsectarian or secular character of the United States (Borden 2012:76–79). As part of the so called Barbary Treaties—meaning treaties with the states of today’s Maghreb—the *Treaty of Tripoli* was about the protection of American ships against the North African pirates and slavetraders in the Mediterranean. The *Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the United States of America and the Bey and Subjects of Tripoli of Barbary* stated in Article 11:

> As the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion, —as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Musselmens, —and as the said States never have entered into any war or act of hostility against any Mehomitan nation, it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries. (Treaty of Peace and Friendship, Signed at Tripoli November 4, 1796 s.a. [1796])

The treaty was ratified unanimously in 1797 and signed by President John Adams (Miller 2008 [1931]). However, while it is a clear statement against the notion of America as a Christian nation, it is technically not necessarily one for a secular state. Instead, it also could originate from the nonsectarian religiosity of the time, which nevertheless excluded atheists. So, read against the grain and put in its context, the treaty might show more than the secular character of the state that the advantages of nonsectarian religion or of secularity for avoiding conflict have been well understood by the American politicians.

But even the nonsectarian character of the civil religion was not a given: Historian Morton Borden describes how the extent to which Americans saw theirs as a Christian and specifically a Protestant nation rose significantly in the middle the 19th century. Morton shows that by comparing the *Treaty of Tripoli* to another international agreement: The *Treaty with China* of 1858 explicitly mentioned the Christian missionaries that were proselytizing in China, as well as their

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8 There exists substantial confusion surrounding the treaty and particularly Art. 11, because the article which appears in the translation is not part of the Arabic original, which was archived by the Department of State. The reasons for that remain unclear. One can only speculate that Muslim leaders found it even more disturbing to sign a treaty with a secular nation than with a Christian one. However, the English version that was signed by President John Adams and ratified by Congress, contained of that passage Miller (2008 [1931]).
Chinese converts and therefore puts the United States in the role of a protective power for Christianity:

The principles of the Christian religion as professed by the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches, are recognized as teaching men to do good; and to do to others as they would have others do to them. Hereafter, those who quietly profess and teach these doctrines shall not be harassed or persecuted on account of their faith. Any persons, whether citizen of the United States or Chinese convert, who according to these tenets peaceably teach and practise the principles of Christianity, shall in no case be interfered with or molested. (as cited in Borden 2012:79)

The treaty was ratified by the senate with only one dissenting vote and beside Isaac Lesser, the Jewish commentator for The Occident who criticized that the negotiations for treaties were entrusted “to sectarians, who look upon their own associates as constituting the whole people of the Union,” there was hardly any protest (Borden 2012:79–82). But one would not have to wait till the mid of the 19th century: Already The Treaty of Paris, which in 1783 ended the American Revolutionary War against Great Britain was declared “In the name of the most holy and undivided Trinity” (Paris Peace Treaty 2008 [1783]).

The follow up to the Treaty of Tripoli, which was signed after the so called First Barbary War, lacked the passage about American not being a Christian nation (see Treaty of Peace and Amity 2008 [1805]). Today, Tripoli is Libya and on Donald Trump’s list of countries whose citizens suffer visa-restrictions for Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States (Trump 2017). That the United States government “has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Musselmen,—and as the said States never have entered into any war or act of hostility against any Mehomitan nation” does not hold true anymore.

For Their Own Good—Religion and Slavery

Neither the Constitution nor the idea of a nonsectarian or even secular state prevented the system of slavery that was part of the United States from the first colonization until long after its formal abolition. The Bible provided plenty of verses that were used to legitimize the enslavement of so-called “heathens.” The most common explanation, according to historian Larry R. Morrison (s.a.:17), is found in Genesis 9:20-27, where Ham sees his father Noah naked and tells others about it. In this Bible story, Noah, after finding out the next morning what his
son has done, cursed Ham’s son Canaan to be the lowest of slaves to his brothers or “a servant of servants.” In his religious pro-slavery pamphlet *Bible View of Slavery*, John Henry Hopkins, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont, interprets this not just as legitimizing slavery between races, but bases this thought on the Christian idea of sin and the abandonment of God:

> The first appearance of slavery in the Bible is the wonderful prediction of the patriarch Noah: […] The heartless irreverence which Ham, the father of Canaan, displayed toward his eminent parent, whose piety had just saved him from the deluge, presented the immediate occasion for this remarkable prophecy; but the actual fulfillment was reserved for his posterity, after they had lost the knowledge of God, and become utterly polluted by the abominations of heathen idolatry. The Almighty, foreseeing this total degradation of the race, ordained them to servitude or slavery under the descendants of Shem and Japhet, doubtless because be judged it to be their fittest condition. And all history proves how accurately the prediction has been accomplished, even to the present day. (Hopkins s.a. [1863]:2, emphasis as in Hopkins)

With the help of the Bible, slavery is legitimiz ed as the punishment for the sin of an alleged ancestor, and the contemporary enslavement of Africans and their descendants presented as the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. The accusations of forgetting God, heathenism, and idolatry establish a racist societal hierarchy. This religiously established connection between the assumption of the inferiority of the “heathen” and the system of slavery becomes even more apparent in Leviticus 25:40-46, which Hopkins uses as a reference, too:

> ‘Both thy bondmen and bondmaids, which thou shalt have, shall be of the heathen that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids. Moreover, of the children of the strangers that do sojourn among you, of them shall ye buy, and of their families that are with you, which they begat in your land, and they shall be your possession. And ye shall take them as an inheritance for your children after you, to inherit them for a possession; THEY SHALL BE YOUR BONDMEN FOR EVER; but over your brethren, the children of Israel, ye shall not rule one over another with rigor. For unto me the children of Israel are servants; they are my servants whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.’ (Hopkins s.a. [1863]:3, emphasis as in Hopkins)
For Hopkins, the Biblical distinction between the temporary servitude of the Israelite and the perpetual slavery of the “heathen race,” is too obvious to be even discussed. In regard to the New Testament, Hopkins points out that Jesus did not condemn slavery. Although it was widespread at his time and although he criticized a lot of other social problems: “[H]e lived in the midst of slavery, maintained over the old heathen races, in accordance with the Mosaic law, and uttered not one word against it!” (Hopkins s.a. [1863]:3–5)

The term *heathen* stems from Old English *hæðen*, which is akin to Old High German *heidan*. It means, “an unconverted member of a people or nation that does not acknowledge the God of the Bible” or “an uncivilized or irreligious person” (Merriam-Webster s.a.l). That means that the term ascribes religious convictions or the lack thereof collectively to a group of people that is established through ancestry. This collectivization is in itself a racist assumption, which is fostered through its combination with the idea of religious inferiority that the term implies. That goes as far as interpreting slavery as of benefit for the slaves, as it has raised the negro incomparably higher in the scale of humanity, and seems, in fact, to be the only instrumentality through which the heathen posterity of Ham have been raised at all. […] And thus the wisdom and goodness of God are vindicated in the sanction which his word has given, and the sentence originally pronounced on Canaan as a curse has been converted into a blessing. (Hopkins s.a. [1863]:16)

It is noteworthy that the author explicitly distances himself from the biologistic theories, which, in his interpretation, held that Africans are somewhat less human and closer to animals: “The Scriptures show me that the negro, like all other races, descends from Noah, and I hold him to be a MAN AND A BROTHER.” But from that, Hopkins concludes, “does not follow that he is my equal” (Hopkins s.a. [1863]:12). Here we deal with a genuine religious legitimization of racism and slavery, which nevertheless resembles the biological justification thereof. The term race is established as a category that distinguishes different ancestry, combines it with certain moral and ethical characteristics, and assumes a different social status for different groups because of that. The relationship to God is thought of as something collective, which makes it possible to punish people for the transgressions of others. The failure to obey the rules of religion legitimizes a difference in legal and political status to the extent of complete domination. Here, the categories of race and nonreligion are inherently intersected.
This religiously legitimized hierarchy was not overthrown when blacks\(^9\) converted. In his famous report about *The Negro Church*, W. E. Burghardt Du Bois—a black fiction and nonfiction author and arguably the first American sociologist of religion (Zuckerman 2002)—describes how little religious education slaves were given in the earlier days of slavery, because since the end of the 16\(^{th}\) century there was a Christian belief that it was illegal and irreligious to hold other Christians in lifelong bondage. Conversion and baptism of slaves would raise all kinds of questions, particularly when church membership was the requirement for franchise. It was a 1667 law of Virginia that then clarified: “Baptisme doth not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or freedom, in order that divers masters freed from this doubt may more carefully endeavor the propagation of Christianity.” (as cited in Du Bois Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt s.a. [1903]:8) It is interesting to see how economic and religious interests were aligned here: The slave-owners put their economic interests above religious ones—if they had any—but the religious interest pushed the law that stated that blacks were not to be freed when they converted, thereby putting their missionary interest over the potential freedom of slaves.

However, since the Great Awakening, which raised interest in religion in both the slaves and their enslavers, the latter saw the necessity of religious instruction that would justify slavery religiously and render disobedience as sinful (Herr 2008:5–6). They used, for example, the Epistle to Philemon 1:10–16. It entails the so called *Pauline Mandate*, the story of Onesimus, the slave of Philemon, who escaped, went to Rome and was sent back to his owner by St. Paul\(^10\) (Morrison s.a.:19–23). Therefore, it was not surprising that the black churches—under white control—emphasized slaves’ obedience towards their masters. The *Rules For the Society of Negroes*, for example, were written by the white Puritan minister Reverend Cotton Mather, who also argued that enslavement was a punishment for the sin against God (Herr 2008:4). His rules included to

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\(^9\) The terms used in those discussions, usually, were “Negro” or “colored person.” Both of them are not in use anymore because of their racist connotation. The now popular term “African American,” however, bears the problem that it connects people to a continent where they may never have been. The term black, as I used it here, is meant to include anyone who was or is discriminated as black (for the discussion about terminology, see, for example, Walker (2012), Yi (s.a) or Reene (2015)).

\(^10\) The Biblical text is actually ambiguous here. The fugitive slave Onesimus is sent back to his master, but Paul, in a letter, suggests that—after his conversion—the master should take him back as a brother, not as a slave. Therefore, the passage can be used in favor or against slavery.
Obtain some Wise and Good Man, of the English in the Neighbourhood, and especially the Officers of the Church, to look in upon us, and by their Presence and Counsel, do what they think fitting for us. (as reprinted in Herr 2008:4)

They even prescribed to reveal fugitive slaves “that they may be discovered, and punished” (as reprinted in Herr 2008:4). At least in the South, religion for many provided not just legitimation but also a tool for oppression of the “heathen races.”

Abolitionism, in turn, was seen as atheist. James Henley Thornwell, later president of South Carolina College, stated that,

the parties in this conflict are not merely abolitionists and slaveholders—they are atheists, socialists, communists, red republicans, jacobins on the one side, and the friends of order and regulated freedom on the other. In one word, the world is the battleground—Christianity and atheism the combatants; and the progress of humanity the stake. (as cited in Jacoby 2005:70–71)

Even in the North, abolitionism initially was met with a great deal of religious opposition, as noted by the British freethinker and politician Charles Bradlaugh: When the radical abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the Liberator and restless worker for universal Human Rights, wanted to hold his first speech for abolition of slavery in Boston, Massachusetts, all Christian denominations denied him a stage. The only place he could speak in was a hall owned by Abner Kneeland, who himself sat in jail for blasphemy (Bradlaugh 2013 [1889]). Once abolitionism was on the victorious side of history, both contemporaries as well as historians depicted it as an inherently religious project (Jacoby 2005:68–69). Or as in the words of Abraham Lincoln: “Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other.” (Lincoln 2008 [1865]) That some of the earliest and most radical abolitionists needed neither God nor Bible to fight against slavery was erased from the collective memory of the United States.

God given Weakness—The Women’s Rights Movements

The pattern of writing the history of social movements without giving credit to nonreligious individuals once the goal becomes common good repeats itself in the women’s rights movement. As a movement, it developed out of the context of abolitionism, and the anticlerical, deist or atheist freethought tradition. Gender roles (not only) in North America have always been shaped
by religious doctrine. When women started to speak out publicly, and what’s more, to mixed, “Promiscues” audiences, the clergy, even in the North, saw the divine order at risk. Sarah and Angelina Grimké, the abolitionist daughters of a Southern slaveholder and among the earliest female public speakers in the United States, gave first hand reports about the rapes of enslaved women through their enslavers. As a response to such public activities of women the General Association of Massachusetts, the highest authority of the Congregational Church, which was the most powerful denomination in this state, in 1837, addressed the churches under their care in a Pastoral letter and pointed out

the dangers which at present seem to threaten the female character with wide-spread and permanent injury. The appropriate duties and influence of woman are clearly stated in the New Testament. Those duties and that influence are unobtrusive and private, but the source of mighty power. When the mild, dependent, softening influence of woman upon the sterness of man’s opinions is fully exercised, society feels the effects of it in a thousand forms. The power of woman is her dependence, flowing from the consciousness of that weakness which God has given her for her protection, (!) and which keeps her in those departments of life that form the character of individuals, and of the nation. There are social influences which females use in promoting piety and the great objects of Christian benevolence which we can not too highly commend. We appreciate the unostentatious prayers and efforts of woman in advancing the cause of religion at home and abroad; in Sabbath-schools; in leading religious inquirers to the pastors (!) for instruction; and in all such associated effort as becomes the modesty of her sex; and earnestly hope that she may abound more and more in these labors of piety and love. But when she assumes the place and tone of man as a public reformer, our care and protection of her seem unnecessary; we put ourselves in self-defence (!) against her; she yields the power which God has given her for her protection, and her character becomes unnatural. (as cited in Cady Stanton, Anthony, Joslyn Gage 2007 [1881]:81–82)

Here the gender roles, which are applied in order to demonize the public activities of women, are taken from the Bible and naturalized. A clear, stereotypical distinction is made between men and women. While men are seen as strong and suited to public life, women are depicted as weak, mild and dependent. Against the idea of equal rights, women are labeled as influential through the prissy fulfillment of their duties. Women’s work is appreciated as long as it stays within the
boundaries of their “department.” Violations of what is seen as God’s law, against the “weakness, which God has given her,” are framed as unnatural and dangerous. And as they are depicted as an abandonment of the godly protection, the male self-defense amounts to an open threat. The situation of enslaved women, who were affected by the racist oppression of slavery as well as by the sexual violence which this state of complete rightlessness aided, were considered “things which ought not to be named” (as cited in Cady Stanton, Anthony, Joslyn Gage 2007 [1881]:82).

The Abolitionist Movement split over the question of whether women could or should be seated on anti-slavery committees. Women like Lucretia Mott or Elizabeth Cady Stanton among many others had worked tirelessly and courageously for the abolition of slavery, but were not allowed to officially serve on the boards of the respective organizations (Jacoby 2005:66–89). Cady Stanton later remembered their anger about the decision that women who crossed the Atlantic to take part in the 1840 World’s Anti-Slavery Convention in London as delegates were not allowed to participate.

The vote by which this injustice was perpetrated, was due to the overwhelming majority of the clergy, who, with Bible in hand, swept all before them. No man can fathom the depths of rebellion in woman’s soul when insult is heaped upon her sex, and this is intensified when done under the hypocritical assumption of divine authority. (Cady Stanton 2007 [1881]:419)

Because of “This fresh baptism into woman’s degradation,” Cady Stanton decided to organize the first Woman’s Rights Convention (Cady Stanton 2007 [1881]:419). The product of this 1848 meeting in Seneca Falls was the Declaration of Sentiments, which in the tone of the Declaration of Independence states:

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are
life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It criticizes among many other things that women were not allowed to vote, are not represented in the government, but bound to its laws; that they lose all their civil rights through marriage and that in the case of a divorce the custody for children goes to the men; that they are denied college
education and are excluded from all profitable forms of employment. In regard to religion the signers grieve that

He allows her in Church, as well as State, but a subordinate position, claiming Apostolic authority for her exclusion from the ministry, and, with some exceptions, from any public participation in the affairs of the Church. He has created a false public sentiment by giving to the world a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral delinquencies which exclude women from society, are not only tolerated, but deemed of little account in man. He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and to her God. (Seneca Falls Convention 2007 [1881])

So, the Seneca Falls Convention was by no means an atheist gathering. It was critical of men claiming exclusive religious authority and religious authority that subdues women. Susan Jacoby describes that as typical for the early Women’s Rights Movement. Women attempted to overcome conservative religious gender norms without giving the appearance of criticizing all religion (Jacoby 2005:92). This, of course, did not prevent them for being called infidels and atheists. The New York Herald, for example, called the new movement for women suffrage a combination of “socialism, abolitionism and infidelity” (as cited in Jacoby 2005:93). Today these early radical figures are barely known or—as in the case of Lucretia Mott—often depicted as driven by their deep religious faith. That they were critical of religion and called “infidels” by their contemporaries is largely erased from the historical memory.

However, those dissidents who did not have connections to the (Protestant) religion at all, like Robert Dale Owen or Frances “Fanny” Wright, are even less remembered (Jacoby 2005:96). One of these forgotten figures was Ernestine Rose. She has played a major role in abolitionism, feminism and to some extent in the fight against anti-Semitism and for the freedom of religion, but she is usually not given credit for any of those. A Jewish immigrant from Russian Poland, she was a dedicated critic not just of slavery and patriarchy but also of all sorts of religion. In her Lecture on Women’s Rights, 1851, she invokes the Declaration of Independence without its reference to God. She criticizes that women have to plead for their rights and for a life in equality.
even here, in this far-famed land of freedom and of knowledge, under a republic that has inscribed on its banner the great truth that all men are created free and equal, and are endowed with inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

She has a holier crusade in mind, “a crusade not to deprive anyone of his rights,” a crusade for “right over might” and against the “the fear of public opinion.” More radical than most of her fellow early feminists, she limits her critique not to clericalism or one-sided interpretations of Scripture, but extends it to all forms of religion or—as she calls it—superstition:

The priests well know the influence and value of women when warmly engaged in any cause, and therefore as long as they can keep them steeped in superstitious darkness, so long are they safe; and hence the horror and anathema against every woman that has intelligence, spirit, and moral courage to cast off the dark and oppressive yoke of superstition. But she must do it, or she will ever remain a slave, for of all tyranny that of superstition is the greatest, and he is the most abject slave who tamely submits to its yoke. (Rose s.a. [1851])

For Rose, the problem is not located in a false interpretation of the Bible or any other religious belief. She sees the problem not just in religious norms but also in women who believe in this religiously indoctrinated inferiority. The term superstition means “a belief or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic or chance, or a false conception of causation.” It can also mean “a notion maintained despite evidence to the contrary” (Merriam-Webster s.a.aa). For centuries, the term was used by the churches in order to label beliefs that differed from their official creed. Thomas Aquinas has defined it as “a vice against religion […] because worship is offered to the wrong objects or at the wrong time or in the wrong manner” (Aquinas s.a. [1273]:2a). And Martin Luther called the Pope the “fountain and source of all superstitions” (Luther 2001 [1520]:539). That Rose now uses the term in order to label all religions doesn’t just express her own atheism but also points out the fatuousness of the accusation of superstition. Calling into question the distinction between true and false religion undermines the very idea of religious truth claims altogether.

Not surprisingly, Rose was detested by many of her religious contemporaries, an effect that often proved her views on the intersection of gender and religion true. One minister wrote about her:
We know of no object more deserving of contempt, loathing, and abhorrence than a female atheist. We hold the vilest strumpet from the stews to be by comparison respectable. (cited after Jacoby 2005:98)

And a newspaper in Maine wrote about her: “a female atheist … a thousand times below a prostitute” (as cited in McGowan 2012:85). Anthropologist Dale McGowan also remarks that she was threatened with physical violence frequently at her speaking events (McGowan 2012:85).

But Rose was also well appreciated by her fellow fighters in the women’s movement for her great achievements in regard to the rights of women, the many petitions to European kings and American legislators, her “matchless powers as a speaker,” and her dignified performance, which “touched the deepest emotions of the human soul” (Barnard 2007 [1881]:101). Nevertheless, the antagonizing and electrifying figure of Rose is largely forgotten in the history of the abolitionist or the feminist movement, and especially in the history of religious freedom in America. That may have to do with her leaving no descendants, or with her marginalized social position: an immigrant in an increasingly nativist society, a Jew in a largely Protestant society, and an atheist in an overwhelmingly religious country (Freedman 2009).

A radical thinker, Rose also antedated the difference between the emerging Women’s Rights Movement and the Temperance Movement, which promoted a ban on alcohol, on obscene literature, entertainment and all kinds of things being labeled as immoral by Christian standards. Although many women saw in temperance a possibility to improve their situation by preventing their husbands from getting drunk in the tavern and spending all the money on liquor or gambling, Rose thought that this was not the point. Instead, she criticized the biased legal system, which, on the basis of religious norms, denied married women possession of their own money (Kolmerten 1999:111–118).

This split over religion and religious morality later continued within the movement for women’s suffrage. After the more radical National Woman Suffrage Association, an all female association led by Cady Stanton and fellow feminist Susan B. Anthony, joined forces with the Women’s Christian Temperance Union in order to fight for the right to vote. The irreligious Elizabeth Cady Stanton soon became persona non grata in the new National American Woman Suffrage Association, although she officially was its first president (Jacoby 2005:194–205). When her Woman’s Bible was published, the majority of the more conservative second-generation within the
Suffrage Movement condemned it. Rachael Foster Avery, a member from Philadelphia, requested a resolution “to show that the association is not responsible” for this enterprise which she said was “without either scholarship or literary value, set forth in a spirit which is neither reverent nor inquiring” (cited in The New York Times s.a. [1896]). Anthony, who shared much of Cady Stanton’s critique but was far less outspoken about it, unsuccessfully asked the members to refrain from censorship:

The one distinct feature of our Association has been the right of individual opinion for every member. We have been beset at every step with the cry that somebody was injuring the cause by the expression of some sentiments that differed with those held by the majority of mankind. The religious persecution of the ages has been done under what was claimed to be the command of God. (Anthony 1998:199–200)

She also addressed the double standards within religious freedoms, which were applied to those not holding a belief: “If she had written approvingly of these passages, you would not have brought in this resolution because you thought the cause might be injured among the liberals in religion.” Despite Anthony’s plea for tolerance, the resolution against the Woman’s Bible was adopted by 53 to 41 (Anthony 1998:201).

Obviously, there exist clearly defined religious gender norms, which confine women to societally inferior positions. However, it would be too easy to portray the fight against those norms as one of women against religion. Even among those Christians who were critical of conservative gender relations, there was solid resistance to positions that were critical of religion in general. Here, religion was able to divide the fight for gender equality along the line between religion and nonreligion.

**Antagonizing the Antichrist—The Ecumenical Exclusion of Atheists**

By the late 19th century, an interesting shift was to be observed in the American landscape with regard to the definition of *infidelity*. According to historian Eric R. Schlereth in his study about the infidel-controversies, the term infidel traditionally was used primarily for non-Christians like Jews and Muslims, while the nonconformists within Christianity were called heretical. The advent of deism, however, made this distinction redundant and deism was labeled “infidel,” while being attributed the subversive force of heresy (Schlereth 2013:2–6).
The best insight in this development can be gained from the Evangelical Alliance, an important international organization of different churches, and its conference that was held in New York in 1873. A daylong section of this meeting was dedicated to “Christianity and its Antagonists,” containing three lectures about The Best Methods of Counteracting Modern Infidelity alone, all three of them by European theologians. In its lecture about American Infidelity William F. Warren, president of Boston University School of Theology and later of Boston University, spoke about the “Factors and Phases” of American “un- and misbelief.” He painted the picture of a “great Christian nation” (Warren s.a. [1874]:249), constantly fighting back the bad and irreverent influences which it gets flooded with from Old Europe. In order to characterize the American present, he goes back to recount how the Great Awakening for the first time united American Christianity, leaving behind religious, ethnic, political and social differences. He describes how the preacher George Whitefield brought Americans together:

Again and again through all these colonies, from New Hampshire to Georgia, this most famous evangelist of history moved in triumph. Puritan New Englanders forgot that he was a gowned priest of the very Church from whose oppressions they had fled to the wilds of a new world. Dutch New York and German Pennsylvania almost unlearned their degenerating vernaculars as they listened to his celestial eloquence. The Quaker was delighted with his gospel simplicity, the Covenanter and Huguenot with his ‘doctrines of grace.’ The Episcopalians were his by rightful church fellowship, and thus it came to pass that when, after crossing the ocean eighteen times in his flying ministry, he lay down in death at Newburyport, he was unconsciously, but in reality, spiritual father of a great Christian nation. (Warren s.a. [1874]:249)

For Warren, the Evangelical Movement had transformed religious belonging from the membership in mutually exclusive organizational entities, which were divided over doctrinal specifics, into a large and all-encompassing Christian web.

This shift made interdenominational cooperation and unity possible. But we can also see how this new unity changed what was considered unbelief or infidelity. The terms unbelief and infidelity conveniently leave open what it actually is that is not believed. As laid out earlier, in Europe and in the colonies everyone who differed from the exact doctrines of the respective church—or at least was suspected of doing so—could have been called an infidel. But in a place as plural as the United States this no longer made sense. The secular Constitution delegitimized the
establishment of a state church, religious revivals made membership fluid, and national challenges like the fight for independence or the several wars made denominational conflict look ridiculous. And, of course, it helped that the overwhelming majority of Americans were in some way heirs of the Reformation. But this national Christian unity, in which ecumenical minds like Warren include even the Catholic Church, does not come without the definition of a new out-group. And who would make a better out-group for this Christian unity than all those who do not identify as Christian?

Warren sees the first wave of European infidelity surging onto the American shores coming from France, and the era of Voltaire: “French deism, witty, sentimental, brilliant, revolutionary, chanced to be the ruling epidemic of the Christian world, and America did not escape.” The three men, who stand out as “hierophants of this new gospel,” were called the “three doubting Thomases” —namely Jefferson, Cooper and Paine. Warren saw Paine’s *Age of Reason* as of “great popular power”—a “sway,” which could be “broken” only by the revivals of 1801 to 1803 (Warren s.a. [1874]:250). In his militant rhetoric, we can observe, that the new ecumenical tolerance ends where a creed goes beyond Christianity. By calling it the “ruling epidemic,” deism is portrayed as a powerful natural force, which is dangerous, contagious, and has the potential to wipe out whole populations. In fact, deism as a concept had almost disappeared by the mid of the 19th century. And although for Warren and many of his contemporaries deism equaled atheism, according to scientist and historian Peter M. Rinaldo, today it is usually used similarly to the term theism and stands for a belief in God (Rinaldo 2000:2).

The next threat to this version of American Christianity Warren saw in Unitarianism and Universalism, which spread in Europe through the Socinians, Joseph Priestley, and John Murray, and was embodied in America in William Ellery Channing and Hosea Ballou. He denounced these new theologies as “reactional” and dangerous: “A graver movement has never marked our history.” While he did not seem to mind in general that one religious group controls a certain institution, he depicted that as an imposition if this group happens to be not exclusively Christian. The movement, he mourned, “bore away from evangelical control the oldest, richest, and most influential college of the whole land. It gave to the new denominations, particularly to

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11 Here it is important to mention that inclusion of Catholicism was by no means consensus: Next to anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism for many was still an important way of drawing boundaries within the religious camp.
the Unitarians, all the prestige of Boston wealth and culture” (Warren s.a. [1874]:250). The name Unitarianism comes from the belief in a single divinity as opposed to the idea of the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It was inserted in the American religious landscape when the Unitarian minister James Freeman replaced his Trinitarian predecessor in the First Episcopal Church in Boston in 1782. Unitarian beliefs gained some momentum during the first half of the 19th century and were indeed influential in New England. While most Unitarians saw themselves as part of Christianity, and certainly as theists, the expansion of Unitarianism in particular beyond New England left room for the inclusion of atheist and humanist views—not without causing strong disputes within the groups. In 1920, they decided that a “creed” is not necessary for belonging to the group, neither for members nor for ministers. And in 1933 a number of Unitarian ministers formulated the Humanist Manifesto (Rinaldo 2000:107–115). Universalists, on the other hand, are named after their belief that salvation is universally granted to the entirety of humans at the Last Judgement. While they were originally Trinitarian, the minister Ballou influenced them in a more Unitarian direction (Rinaldo 2000:109–110). The two groups eventually merged in 1960. While they agreed upon their “Judeo-Christian heritage,” they also accept atheists and can be considered one of the most important organizational structures for atheism in the United States (Rinaldo 2000:111–117). However, their membership for the entire United States in 2016 sunk below 200,000 (Unitarian Universalist Association s.a.).

According to Warren, a new hazard reached the United States before the Unitarians and Universalists were able to “ripen the seeds of error in them,” and that was what he called “infidel Socialism and its American propagandists.” Warren describes socialism in genuinely pathological language. For him, Robert Owen’s Declaration of Mental Independence was the “commencement of a Socialistic fever, amounting at times and in places to a genuine mania, which for twenty years in one form or the other, inflamed the public mind.” The Owenite Movement, which he saw embodied in George H. and Frederick W. Evans, Fanny Wright, and A.J. Macdonald12, the utopian associations of Brook Farm and Hopedale, the Free Love of Oneida-Community, the socialist experiments in Brockton, as well as “the extravagances of Fourierism” were for Warren “the most formidable demonstration which the spirit of the Antichrist had ever made among us” (Warren s.a. [1874]:251). Owen’s idea was to extend the spirit of the Declaration of Independence and

12 According to the Yale University Library, Macdonald’s first names are not known Yale University Library (2016).
to acquire a state of “Mental Liberty.” He declared that humans have been slaves to the evils of private property, irrational and absurd religious systems, and the institution of marriage which is based on those irrational teachings. “The revolution,” he goes on

then, to be now effected, is the destruction of this HYDRA OF EVILS—in order that the many may be no longer poor, wretched beings,—dependent on the wealthy and powerful few; that Man may be no longer a superstitious idiot, continually dying from the futile fear of death; that he may no longer unite himself to the other sex from any mercenary or superstitious motives, nor promise and pretend to do that which it depends not on himself to perform. (Owen s.a. [1826])

Although Owen himself was a Deist, he was also tolerant of organized forms of religion. In his American community New Harmony, the church building was open—without charge—to every minister who wanted to come. And when one of those visiting preachers called Owen the Anti-Christ and community members proposed to eject him, Owen himself defended the minister’s freedom of speech (Rinaldo 2000:61).

Warren, in his rant against the unbelievers, then goes on to mock the “spiritualistic camp,” where he thinks that most of the socialists have ended up: “Materialism and its unbelief carried unballasted minds clean over to necromantic superstition.” In regard to materialism and naturalism, his main concerns are the Phrenology of Franz Joseph Gall and his pupils Charles Caldwell, Johann Gaspar Spurzheim and George Combe. Furthermore, he mentions the influence of Mother Ann Lee, the Swedenborg inspired “seership” of Andrew Jackson Davis, Mesmerism, rapping, and the teaching of Robert Dale Owen, the son of Robert Owen. Although he recognizes spiritualism as a “faith,” he laughs about what they believe to be their “invisible allies” (Warren s.a. [1874]:252). The term necromantic means “conjunction […] of the spirits of the dead for purposes of magically revealing the future or influencing the course of events.”

13 It is no coincidence, that he does not list racism as one of the major evils. Owen’s idea of overcoming discrimination was limited to what he called “artificial inequality.” In the Owenite Community “Persons of all ages and descriptions, exclusive of persons of color, may become members of the Preliminary Society. Persons of color may be received as helpers to the Society, if necessary, or if it be found useful, to prepare and enable them to become associates in Communities in Africa; or in some other country, or in some other part of this country” Owen (s.a. [1826]). Also Fanny Wright’s proposal to end slavery by establishing communities in which slaves could earn money to purchase their own freedom Rinaldo (2000:59–60), fell back behind the radical abolitionists.
By calling it superstition, Warren—despite his inclusive approach—maintains boundaries of legitimate supernatural worship and illegitimate supernatural belief.

The next “oceanic current” that reached the United States was German philosophy and criticism as initiated by David Friedrich Strauss, Ernest Renan and Carl Vogt and publicized in America by Karl (Charles) Follen. “Naturally,” as Warren put it, these new errors took hold among the Unitarians, as the “least vital and coherent religious body of the country” first: “Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker strode past Socinus and Channing, the one to the cold heights of a poetic Pantheism, the other to the citadel of an eclectic Antichristian Theism.” (Warren s.a. [1874]:252) Indeed, both Emerson and Parker overcame the Unitarian belief in the Bible and the miracles, reaching a more Deist understanding of a creator combined with idealistic humanism and reverence for nature (Rinaldo 2000:67). Together with their friends Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, and others, they formed a movement that was called New England Transcendentalism (Rinaldo 2000:67–79). Emerson was also influential for the Free Religious Association led by Octavius Brooks Frothingham. At the opening conference, he expressed his wish for a movement “that thus invites all classes, all religious men, whatever their connections, whatever their specialties, in whatever relation they stand to the Christian church. […] The church is not large enough for the man…” (as cited in Kellaway 2010:5). For Warren, the Evangelical Christian, this “undermine[s] all distinctively Christian ideas and institutions” (Warren s.a. [1874]:252).

Warren describes all forms of unbelief as un-American: “Glancing back for a moment over these successive waves of opposition to the kingdom of Christ in America, one is struck first of all by the fact, that none of them were of American origin.” (Warren s.a. [1874]:252) According to him, it were “European soldiery,” communistic crusaders, and their “foreign-born adjutants” who spread unbelief in the United States. Here we can observe how religion in a pluralistic but decidedly Christian shape became the signature of American nationalism and how immigration was rendered as a religious threat. Two centuries ago, those who arrived at the American shores saw themselves as the most pure religionists, who left Europe to find religious liberty in the new world. Now, the European immigrants were portrayed as a flood that undermines American religion through their liberal ideas.
As genuine American “errors” in regard to religion, he mentions “the wild excrescences of Mormonism, Millerism, and Shakerism,” but he sees all of them going “in the direction of superstition rather than in that of unbelief.” For Warren is clear:

America has given the Old World valuable theological speculations, admirable defenses of the faith, precious revival influences, memorable exhibitions of international charity, but she has never cursed humanity with a new form of infidelity. (Warren s.a. [1874]:253)

He then only briefly mentions the Investigator, as “an organ of pure atheism” and its conductor Abner Kneeland, Francis Ellingwood Abbot’s weekly Index, which he finds as of an “open Anti-Christian character” as it promotes the thinking of the Free Religious Association, and the Radical, a “monthly of somewhat pretentious character.” The magazines The Golden Age, the Woodhull and Claflin Weekly, and the Oneida Circular he calls “mouth-pieces not so much of Antichristian faith as of Antichristian morals” (Warren s.a. [1874]:253).

The term Antichristian deserves some attention. The prefix anti means being “against” or “opposed” to something or someone (Merriam-Webster s.a.e), and so the word means being against or opposed to Christianity or Christians. This alone is an allegation, because what he calls “Antichristian morals” oftentimes is not opposed to Christianity but to the fact that Christianity sets the rules for how people have to organize their lives and their love. But for Warren, challenging the Christian dominance is an aggression. Although they are a small minority in an overwhelmingly Christian country, non-Christians are depicted as powerful and as imposturous. However, the term “Antichristian” also evokes the association with the “Antichrist” and Warren himself explicitly draws that connection, when he talks about the socialists. The Antichrist stands for “the polar opposite and enemy of Christ” (Lenner s.a.). In the Jewish tradition, the Antichrist first appears in the Book of Daniel, where the coming of a final persecutor is foretold. But because this persecutor is not explicitly named, the prediction could be applied to any persecutor. Over time, the Christian literature has described him with many attributes and in different forms: He can be the one or many, even a group or an institution. In his reign he will be followed by the worldly leaders and persecute Christians (Lenner s.a.)—an idea that Warren takes up when he says, “America did not escape.” As this view of the Antichrist and the end of his reign in the second coming of Christ has—in several variations—fired the eschatological imagination of Christians until today, the term “Antichristian” always carries the meaning of the ultimate evil.
Warren’s lecture is not just an overview of the emerging American freethought scene; it also shows what was considered as unbelief in his time and how this had changed. If we take a closer look at his selection and classification, several things stand out that mark the shift in the creation of a new American out-group. The early colonists were concerned about the “savage” and the “heathen.” Protestants for centuries have viewed the Pope or the papacy as the Antichrist. But where the Evangelical Movement wants to be ecumenical, a new Antichrist is needed, and at least Warren has found it in the “Antichristian” infidel. This corresponds with how he draws the line between unbelief and superstition. It is not as random as one might think because of his obvious intent to render all unbelief as being of foreign descent. Those thinkers and groups who he labels as “superstition”—for him apparently a lesser evil—all self-identify in some way as Christian. Those who are identified as unbelievers, on the other hand, have for the most part left the Christian spectrum and hold religious or nonreligious views that go beyond it. He does not explicitly mention feminism or abolitionism even after otherwise conservative Christian movements have adopted many of their demands. Where concrete emancipatory, abolitionist and feminist enterprises like the Investigator or the Woodhull and Claflin Weekly are brought up, this is seen not as a matter of Antichristian faith but of “Antichristian morals.”

Warren is relatively careful where he condemns atheism and pantheism:

There is a state of spiritual purblindness and insensibility and bondage to sense to which Atheism and Pantheism are perfect counterparts. The atheistic or pantheistic theory of the universe fully and satisfactorily accounts for all the facts coming within the narrow range of such a mind, and clearly apprehend by it. It has a right, therefore, for the time being, to rest satisfied in that system. The fault is not in the system, but in the condition of the mind. (Warren s.a. [1874]:253)

The atheist and the pantheist are depicted as narrow but pitiable characters, who are just not able to get the bigger picture. Although one could argue that the self-avowed atheists in the emerging freethought movement made a more radical break with traditional religion than the Deists, Unitarians, and Universalists—which he demonizes strongly—he does not take them too seriously. The borders of the right belief that he defends are still more narrowly defined. But the time of the “atheist” is about to come.
Fighting with Monkeys—The Challenge of Evolution

Maybe the most important wave of unbelief that spilled over from Europe was the theory of evolution, often called “Darwinism,” after the English scientist Charles Darwin. Its discovery greatly upset those Christians who did believe in the creation of the world and the species in seven days according to the Biblical book of Genesis. But the scientific questioning of the claims of the Bible and the erosion of faith in God that it caused did not start with Darwin’s publication of the *Origin of Species* in 1859. The zeitgeist in Europe was filled with scientific optimism and religious doubt. To illustrate this point, we can look to the autobiographical story of a young man who was trained as a minister in British Cambridge, but then was offered the chance to take part in a two-year scientific ship voyage in 1836-39:

Whilst on board [of that ship] I was quite orthodox, and I remember being heartily laughed at by several of the officers (though themselves orthodox) for quoting the Bible as an unanswerable authority on some point of morality. I suppose it was the novelty of the argument that amused them. But I had gradually come, by this time, to see that the Old Testament from its manifestly false history of the world, with the Tower of Babel, the rainbow as a sign, etc., etc., and from its attributing to God the feelings of a revengeful tyrant, was no more to be trusted than the sacred books of the Hindoos, or the beliefs of any barbarian.

Later, he goes on:

By further reflecting that the clearest evidence would be requisite to make any sane man believe in the miracles by which Christianity is supported,—that the more we know of the fixed laws of nature the more incredible do miracles become,—that the men at that time were ignorant and credulous to a degree almost incomprehensible by us,—that the Gospels cannot be proved to have been written simultaneously with the events,—that they differ in many important details, far too important as it seemed to me to be admitted as the usual inaccuracies of eye-witnesses;—by such reflections as these, which I give not as having the least novelty or value, but as they influenced me, I gradually came to disbelieve in Christianity as a divine revelation. The fact that many false religions have spread over large portions of the earth like wild-fire had some weight with me. Beautiful
as is the morality of the New Testament, it can hardly be denied that its perfection depends in part on the interpretation, which we now put on metaphors and allegories.

But I was very unwilling to give up my belief;—I feel sure of this for I can well remember often and often inventing day-dreams of old letters between distinguished Romans and manuscripts being discovered at Pompeii or elsewhere which confirmed in the most striking manner all that was written in the Gospels. But I found it more and more difficult, with free scope given to my imagination, to invent evidence which would suffice to convince me. Thus disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, but was at last complete. The rate was so slow that I felt no distress, and have never since doubted even for a single second that my conclusion was correct. I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my Father, Brother and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine.

In this autobiographical record, we can observe how the understanding of the Bible as divine revelation and with it, its moral authority dwindled step by step. Once some aspects of it were pulled into question, this gave way to all kinds of doubts. As exploring other continents has historically raised awareness of the variety of religious faiths in the world, this also revealed the relativeness of religious truth claims. Confronted with new scientific findings, the young man compares Biblical history with historical facts and evaluates the possibility of miracles by the application of natural laws. And once he had left the track of believe as the source of evidence, he had to realize how hard his Biblical convictions were to prove. But it was not just the incompatibility of Scripture with natural science. Biblical doctrines themselves also provoked opposition. Why do some parts of the Bible contradict others? How could God be so vengeful? And how could He damn good people just for not believing? One can feel the personal relief that the author experienced once the fear of eternal damnation of his loved ones and maybe of himself was lifted. And one can see how this relief made space for a new morality that values the New Testament but reduces it to a collection of nice metaphors.

The young man who has been “heartily laughed at” by scientists for his literal interpretation of the Bible was Charles Darwin himself (see Darwin 2012:108) [1887]. It was on the return from this journey to South America that he first thought his observations could help to shed light on
the question of the origin of species, that “mystery of mysteries” (Darwin 2008 [1859]:21) as he called it in reference to the English scientist John Herschel.

Darwin’s theory that the species evolved gradually over a long time and through natural selection, which favored those who were adapted a little bit better than others, implied that “species are produced and exterminated by slowly acting and still existing causes, and not by miraculous acts of creation.” Against the claims of Genesis 1:25 that species have been created each according to their kind, he claims that life has “been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one” (Darwin 2008 [1859]:527–529) and evolved from lesser to higher species over a long period of time. Despite the acknowledgement of a creator, his theory was at odds with the Biblical version of creation. Darwin was aware of the potential controversy that his findings could cause. So he remarks: “I see no good reason why the views given in this volume should shock the religious feelings of any one” and reminds the reader that “the greatest discovery ever made by man, namely, the law of the attraction of gravity, was also attacked […] ‘as subversive of natural, and inferentially of revealed, religion’” (Darwin 2008 [1859]:920).

But an alternative explanation for the genesis of the world was considered too much by the defenders of the truth of Biblical revelation. While there were actually many Christians who were able to reconcile this and other scientific findings with their belief by—as Darwin called it—understanding the Bible as metaphors and allegories, some had to wipe out these ambiguities at any price. They feared the forces of doubt, and believed that Darwin’s theory would catalyze the process of apostasy that has only crept slowly on Darwin himself through the intense observation of natural facts and knowledge of other theories. The result was a campaign against scientific knowledge that targeted liberal Christians and atheists at the same time. The Presbyterian Princeton theologian Charles Hodge complains that

Great confusion and diversity of opinion prevail as to the real views of the man whose writings have agitated the whole world, scientific and religious. If a man says he is a Darwinian, many understand him to avow himself virtually an atheist; while another understands him as saying that he adopts some harmless form of the doctrine of evolution. This is a great evil.
In his pamphlet *What is Darwinism?* Hodge refuses to discuss the merits of the theory “until we are agreed as to what that theory is” (Hodge s.a. [1874]:1). He discusses several objections against Darwin and comes to the conclusion:

> It is Atheism. This does not mean, as before said, that Mr. Darwin himself and all who adopt his views are atheists; but it means that his theory is atheistic; that the exclusion of design from nature is […] tantamount to atheism. (Hodge s.a. [1874]:176)

As the teaching of evolution was perceived as threat to the authority of the Bible and the deeply held believes about mankind, many politicians tried to outlaw it in schools. The most prominent anti-evolution case was perhaps the Scopes “Monkey” Trial in Tennessee. In 1925, State Representative John Washington Butler enacted a bill prohibiting “the teaching of the Evolution Theory in all the Universities, Normals and all other public schools of Tennessee, which are supported in whole or in part by the public school funds of the State” under a fine of at 100-500 Dollars “for each offense” (Butler 2008 [1925]). As a reaction, the recently founded American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which was concerned about the violation of religious freedom, offered to defend anyone who was prosecuted because of the new law. In biology teacher John Scopes, they found their defendant. And in agnostic Clarence Darrow, a nationally well-known defense lawyer (ACLU 2010). The prosecution was led by the conservative Christian and three time presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan. And with two so prominent figures involved, the trial attracted national attention. It was broadcasted on the radio throughout the United States and almost one thousand people attended the first day of the trial. The jury consisted of twelve men, of which eleven were regular churchgoers (Linder s.a.). When Darrow objected against the trial being opened by a prayer, the judge answered:

> I am responsible for the conduct of the court, it has been my custom since I have been a judge to have prayers in the courtroom when it was convenient and I know of no reason why I should not follow up this custom, so I will overrule the objection. (State v. Scopes s.a. [1925]:Day 3)

The defense did not argue that the defendant did not violate the anti-evolution statute, but that the law itself must be annulled. In an argument which resembled that of James Madison in the fight against the establishment of Christianity in Virginia, Darrow warns:
If today you can take a thing like evolution and make it a crime to teach it in the public school, tomorrow you can make it a crime to teach it in the private schools, and the next year you can make it a crime to teach it to the hustings or in the church. At the next session you may ban books and the newspapers. Soon you may set Catholic against Protestant and Protestant against Protestant, and try to foist your own religion upon the minds of men. If you can do one you can do the other. (State v. Scopes s.a. [1925]:Day 2)

But the court rejected this argument and Scopes was held guilty for offending the law. The ACLU took it as a success anyway. When questioned by the defense as a witness, the main prosecutor William Jennings Bryan actually had to admit that he did not think of the seven days of creation as literal days and that he thought that the world is much older than suggested by a literal understanding of the Bible. Darrow’s questions that Bryan answered voluntarily “in order to shut his mouth so that he cannot go out and tell his atheistic friends that I would not answer his questions” (State v. Scopes s.a. [1925]:Day 7), turned out to resonate with the audience more than Bryan’s answers. Nevertheless, it took until 1968 that the Supreme Court finally ruled that legislation which forbids the teaching of evolution was unconstitutional because it “violates the Fourteenth Amendment, which embraces the First Amendment’s prohibition of state laws respecting an establishment of religion” (United States Supreme Court 1968). But even in the 21st century, conservative Christians keep trying to introduce bills that allow for the teaching of anti-evolution viewpoints and creationism in schools (Johnson, Scheitle and Ecklund 2016).

**Progress and Backlash—Freethinkers and Fundamentalists**

John Butler, the man who sponsored the anti-evolution bill and later worked as a reporter on the Scopes trial, called the evolution debate “the controversy of the age” and the trial “the beginning of a great battle between infidelity and Christianity” (as cited in Linder 2004). But by then, for many others this battle had long begun. The last quarter of the 19th and the first decade of the 20th century, with its widespread appreciation for science and progress, has been the “Golden Age of Freethought” but also the beginning of the fundamentalism movement.

The term *freethinker* means, “a person who thinks freely or independently” and “forms opinions on the basis of reason independently of authority.” Especially it describes someone “who rejects or is skeptical of religious dogma” (Merriam-Webster s.a.j). It was first used in 1692 and popularized through the book *Discourse of Freethinking* by the English philosopher Anthony
Collins, who defined the term as “the Use of the Understanding, in endeavouring to find out the Meaning of any Proposition whatsoever, in considering the nature of the Evidence for or against it, and in judging of it according to the seeming Force or Weakness of the Evidence” (Collins s.a. [1713]:5). This idea was reflected in the names of many classical periodicals of the movement, like the Boston Investigator, the Truth Seeker, the Free Inquirer, Free-Thought Ideal and Free-Thought Vindicator (Jacoby 2005:155). Different from the oftentimes derogatory terms used by the religious side, like heathens or infidels, the term freethinker was one that people applied to themselves or to others in an appreciating way.

In the late 19th century, the freethinkers were an eclectic bunch of reformers of all cultural and philosophical backgrounds. They fought not just for freedom of religion, but for a broad variety of political and social issues, including public education, the rights of free speech and artistic expression, women’s rights, reproductive rights and rights against domestic violence. They opposed capital punishment and fought for the rights of prisoners and for the improvement of the situation in psychiatric facilities (Jacoby 2005:154). Its most prominent representative was Robert Green Ingersoll, who—as an eloquent speaker—attracted thousands of listeners. He was dedicated to the liberation of humanity, and concerned about topics ranging from The Liberty of Children to the question Is Suicide a Sin?

Ingersoll called himself an agnostic. An agnostic is “a person who holds the view that any ultimate reality (such as God) is unknown and probably unknowable” or someone “who is not committed to believing in either the existence or the nonexistence of God or a god.” The term agnosticism derives from Greek agnōstos unknown, unknowable, from a- + gnōstos known, from gignōškein to know” (Merriam-Webster s.a.d). The term is accredited to the English philosopher Thomas Huxley—neither theist nor atheist—who used it in order to describe what he thought was the impossibility of knowing the ultimate truth of our existence (Draper 2017).

As an agnostic, the oppression of the mind through religious dogmata and institutions was for Ingersoll the center of his concerns:

Only a few years ago there was a great awakening of the human mind. Men began to inquire by what right a crowned robber made them work for him? The man who asked this question was called a traitor. Others asked by what right does a robed hypocrite rule my thought? Such men were called infidels. The priest said, and the king said, where is
Ingersoll, of course, rejected such a limitation. He did not want to come up with a new universal truth, but claimed liberty of thought universally: “Whoever claims any right that he is unwilling to accord to his fellow-men is dishonest and infamous.” (Ingersoll 2006 [1900]:332) He recounted the torture and the harm that was done in the name of religion and he reminded his listeners of those who had died for their convictions. But he also pointed out the change which had been reached through these nonconformists and how that had created a better and freer society:

After all, we are improving from age to age. The most orthodox people in this country two hundred years ago would have been burned for the crime of heresy. The ministers who denounce me for expressing my thought would have been in the Inquisition themselves. Where once burned and blazed the bivouac fires of the army of progress, now glow the altars of the church. The religionists of our time are occupying about the same ground occupied by heretics and infidels of one hundred years ago. The church has advanced in spite, as it were, of itself. It has followed the army of progress protesting and denouncing, and had to keep within protesting and denouncing distance. If the church had not made great progress I could not express my thoughts. (Ingersoll 2006 [1900]:348)

This optimism must have scared the more conservative minds in the churches. Ingersoll’s criticism held a mirror up to them; and they must have recognized themselves in the role of those who were called heretics in the past, as well as in the role of those who call others so in the present. Ingersoll confronted them with the thought that their truth might just be a matter of time. Although he worked as an adviser and speechwriter for politicians, the lawyer Ingersoll himself never had a political career (Jacoby 2005:158). In the 19th century it was not conceivable to vote a godless man into office—and as polls show, that this hasn’t changed much today (Pew Research Center 2016).

The backlash that was waiting for the freethinkers and the liberal Christians may have started with a man who was born around the same time and worked equally tireless in his public activities as Ingersoll, but had a radically different vision: Dwight Lyman Moody (Marsden 2006:33). Moody stands for a new approach to evangelizing: He allured the children of the immigrant underclass to his mission with pony rides and candy, and attracted the adults through
English classes. His approach was: “If you can really make a man believe you love him, you have won him.” (as cited in Galli 2010:70–72) He also created several institutions for the spread of the Evangelical gospel. The most famous being the Chicago Evangelization Society, which was renamed the Moody Bible Institute after his death.

When Robert Ingersoll died in 1899 after a reportedly happy and fulfilling life, Moody said about him:

My feeling toward him has always been that of deepest pity, for a life like his seems so barren of everything that has made my life joyous and blessed. How dark must be the life of a man for whom, by his own confession, it was like ‘a narrow vale between the peaks of two eternities; we cry aloud, and the only answer is the echo of our calling,’ and for whom death seemed like ‘a leap into the dark.’ [...] How much Colonel Ingersoll’s sorrowing wife and daughters need our prayers, as they stand by the still body of their loved one, if they really believe the hopeless doctrine he taught! (as cited in Moody 1900:430–431)

Here, a classical attitude towards of atheists appears: pity. For Moody, it was unimaginable that Ingersoll was happy without believing in God and Jesus Christ, because apparently Moody was not before he found his way to God. The offense towards Ingersoll’s family is mantled in sympathy, but full of cynicism: Particularly if his wife and daughters “really” held similar beliefs as Ingersoll himself, they would not have needed the prayers of a Christian who did not want to understand their view. Therefore, it is most likely that the prayers Moody asks for were not supposed to comfort the Ingersoll family but to turn them into believers. So even in the most difficult moments Moody could not spare people from his proselytizing. Ingersoll’s liberating vision that everybody’s beliefs should be tolerated was not one of Moody’s convictions.

However, for Moody, unbelief was not just a personal tragedy, but a threat to America: In his Ten Commandments, he wrote that “heathenism” is all over America. Man makes God out of himself, out of money, pleasure or fashion. But he finds

all false gods are not as gross as these. There is the atheist. He says that he does not believe in God; he denies His existence, but he can’t help setting up some other god in His place. Voltaire said, ‘If there were no God, it would be necessary to invent one.’ So
the atheist speaks of the Great Unknown, the First Cause, the Infinite Mind, etc. (Moody 2005 [1896])

Here it is obvious that, for Moody, it was just not comprehensible that people do not need God: He can only think in terms of the right God and false gods. Although he seems to know what the term atheist means, he just cannot accept that some people don’t need a God at all. He even uses a quote by Enlightenment philosopher and church-critic Voltaire to argue his point.

But the feeling of crisis that was perceived by more traditional Christians was not caused by a few freethinkers and atheists. Scholars debate which were the primary reasons for the development of American fundamentalism. Theologian H. Richard Niebuhr (2005) interpreted it as a reaction to social and cultural change, historian Ernest Sandeen (2008) emphasizes the roots of the movement in millenarian thought. Historian George Marsden (2006) points out the importance of Evangelical anti-modernism, and religion scholar Betty deBerg (1990) emphasizes the role of the changing gender norms, to name just a few factors that moved people in a time that was characterized through so many social changes as was the Gilded Age.

Fundamentalism was as a diverse movement, which was united through militantly opposing everything that was considered modernism (Marsden 2006:4). However, it was not just an opposition to cultural developments but also to theological developments. Christianity in the United States split into a liberal and a more fundamentalist camp. Liberal theologians were often influenced by the Tübingen School and Biblical Criticism of David Friedrich Strauss, who had studied The Life of Jesus as a historical person rather than that of “a God-begotten miracle worker” (Strauss s.a.:99), as he was depicted in the New Testament. The conservative response to that was to make their dogma of the inerrancy of the Bible mandatory, which led to countless arguments and heresy trials within the various denominations (Marsden 2006:102–118). Among the Presbyterians, these debates were fought particularly hard and in 1910 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church published a set of “fundamentals” which they saw as “essential and necessary” dogmas for their church. Those fundamentals were:

1. Inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures.
2. Virgin birth of Jesus Christ.
3. Vicarious atonement of Jesus Christ.
4. Reality of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.

5. Actuality of the miracles of Jesus Christ. (Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. General Assembly 1910:272, 1031)

The explanatory statement for these articles shows that these Presbyterians do not just address the members of their own denomination, but that they are concerned with the whole society. They perceive any questioning of their doctrines as an assault:

It is an age of doubt. Many elements of the faith delivered, once for all, to the saints, and embodied in the immemorial testimony of the Christian Church, are by many openly questioned and rejected. Thereby the fundamentals not only of our faith as a Church, but of Evangelical Christianity, are assaulted. Laxity in matters of moral opinion has been followed by laxity in matters of moral obligation. It is an age of impatience, of no restraint. The spirit of license and lawlessness is abroad. Authority in Church and State alike is decadent because its defiance has so often been unchecked. The safeguards of society are threatened. The decline in the elements of an essential religion is followed by a groveling and growing superstition that shames alike our sanity, our faith and our civilization. (Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. General Assembly 1910:271)

Concerning the question of the inconsistency of the Biblical wonders with physical laws, they state that these wonders were “not contrary to nature, but superior to it” (Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. General Assembly 1910:273). Ingersoll’s hope that the churches might become more and more liberal has—at least in the beginning of the 20th century—not materialized.

And neither was this the only attempt to bring people back to the fundamentals of the faith: The Bible Institute of Los Angeles, which was designed largely after the model of the Moody Bible Institute, published the *The Fundamentals: A Testimony To The Truth*, a series of 90 essays. The series was meant to be sent out to every pastor, theologian, evangelist, Sunday school superintendent, missionary, and the secretaries of the Christian youth organizations in the English speaking world and was payed for by two private laymen because they believed “that the time has come when a new statement of the fundamentals of Christianity should be made” (Dixon 2008 [1910]:I: 4). The topics of the collection include classic conservative Christian dogmas like *The Virgin Birth of Christ, The Deity of Christ, The Personality and Deity of the Holy Spirit, The Testimony of the Monuments to the Truth of the Scriptures* or *The Doctrinal Value of the First Chapters of Genesis*. But it contains also
discussions of modern philosophy, new literary history of the Bible and science in titles like *Holy Scripture and Modern Negations, Fallacies of the Higher Criticism, The Passing of Evolution* or the *Decadence of Darwinism*.

Atheism is perceived in different ways in the *Fundamentals*. The materialist-turned-Christian Supreme Court lawyer Philip Mauro formulated that

> We need pay no attention to atheistic philosophy, for the reason that it is quite out of favor at the present day, and shows no sign of ever recovering a respectable status. (Mauro 2008 [1910]:91–92)

But the Scottish Presbyterian minister Thomas Whitelaw saw the need to discuss the arguments of the atheist, as well as of the agnostic, the materialist and “the (Bible) fool.” In regard to atheism he observes that

> In these days it will hardly do to pass by this bold and confident negation by simply saying that the theoretical atheist is an altogether exceptional specimen of humanity, and that his audacious utterance is as much the outcome of ignorance as of impiety [because] it becomes apparent that theoretical atheism is not extinct, even in cultured circles. (Whitelaw 2008 [1910]:22–23)

While he acknowledges that reason can prove neither God’s existence nor non-existence, he then goes on to argue,

> before one can positively assert that there is no God, he must arrogate to himself the wisdom and ubiquity of God. He must explore the entire circuit of the universe to be sure that no God is there. He must have interrogated all the generations of mankind and all the hierarchies of heaven to be certain they had never heard of a God. (Whitelaw 2008 [1910]:23–24)

That prominent atheists like Thomas Henry Huxley or Robert Blatchford are incapable of seeing any evidence for the existence of God,

> may, and no doubt does, serve as an explanation of their atheistical creed, but assuredly it is no justification of the same, since a profounder reasoner than either has said: ‘The
invisible things of God since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even His everlasting power and divinity; so that they [who believe not] are without excuse.’ (Whitlaw 2008 [1910]:24)

Citing the Bible and Biblical scholarship as reason against the arguments of atheism reveals much about the understanding of the fundamentalist theologians of the time. Typically, for them the Bible was a collection of facts, not of metaphors; the Bible was science, while “the theory of evolution” was mere speculation. And it was only reasonable to cling to the facts. Historian James Turner describes how in the intellectual confrontation between faith and reason during the 16th and 17th century, most of the anti-atheist polemics had adapted their strategy to the new enlightened ways of knowing and presented faith as reasonable and as the result of scientific investigation (Turner 1985:28-30 and passim). Some of the writers even resembled the scientific style of the time, by underscoring each of their claims with proof from the Bible. This reveals the fundamental differences in the reference systems of atheists and literalistic believers, a difference in how one understands the truth and what counts as a legitimate source of knowledge—a fundamental difference that exists until today (Klug 2013).

Atheists in Foxholes—The First World War and Conscientious Objection

Historian George Marsden describes the Fundamentals as a more moderate, almost quiet version of the fundamentalism to come. The evangelicals and proto-fundamentalists were still largely staying away from the political issues of the time. Few expected the outburst that followed (Marsden 2006:6, 142).

In 1914, at the beginning of the First World War, many Christians were against the American engagement in the war, even if it were for different reasons: The traditional peace churches, like the Society of Friends, the Mennonites and the Church of the Brethren were uncompromising pacifist. Peace advocates, like William Jennings Bryan, who even stepped down as Woodrow Wilson’s secretary of State in order to hold on to his principles, also opposed war in general. However, like Bryan, many of them altered their position once America was involved in the war (Marsden 2006:142). The pre-millennialists opposed the war or wanted to stay neutral because, from their anti-political perspective, they thought that it was hopeless for men to attempt to solve problems in the world through political actions, be they peace or war. In response to a peace-advocating stance like that of Bryan they retorted, as Arno C. Geabelein had put it in the
Dispensionalist journal *Our Hope*: “‘Peace and Safety’ is what the world and the apostate Christendom wants to hear.” But “Sudden judgement,” Geabelein predicted, “will someday bring the terrible awakening” (as cited in Marsden 2006:143). To them, the war itself was a sign that the end times were coming (Marsden 2006:143–144).

However, later in the war, after many struggles between pre- and postmillennialists, conservatives and liberals, as well as between those who opposed war in general and those who saw this war as being necessary for creating peace, a strong connection between patriotism, war and Christianity became characteristic for the First World War-period in the United States. In 1918, Congress passed a resolution which stated that it is “a duty peculiarly incumbent in a time of war humbly and devoutly to acknowledge our dependence on Almighty God and to implore His aid and protection,” and therefore urged president Wilson to recommend a day of public humiliation, prayer, and fasting, to be observed by the people of the United States with religious solemnity and the offering of fervent supplications to Almighty God for the safety and welfare of our cause, His blessings on our arms, and a speedy restoration of an honorable and lasting peace to the nations of the earth. (Congress of the United States 1918, as cited in Wilson s.a. [1918])

As a result, Wilson declared Decoration Day 1918 to be a national day of prayer, on which people were supposed to “pray Almighty God that He may forgive our sins and shortcomings as a people” (Wilson s.a. [1918]). This repentance call was widely observed and smoothed the way into war engagement and patriotism even for most of the premillennialists (Marsden 2006:151).

In order to explain the war in Europe, fundamentalists of different backgrounds drew a line from the questioning of Biblical truth and Christian norms, to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, to the brutality of the war. Presbyterian Princeton Professor William Brenton Greene Jr., in his concerns about *The Present Crisis of Ethics*, worried about the “revival of paganism” in the last 25 years, as it manifested itself in rationalism or the supremacy of reason, naturalism as the theory of evolution and Higher Criticism, and the Idealistic philosophy of Kant and Hegel, which all resulted in the exclusion of the supernatural, the “repudiation” of Christian dogmata and ethics, and hence the war (Greene, JR. 1919 [1918]:2–8). Man, said Greene, had social sentiments, but needed a restrictive set of rules in order to behave moral. And for him, this set of rules could only be provided by religion:
Ask yourself further what would it mean were might put in the place of right: and instead of men who were trying to be good because it was godlike to be so, we were to have, or to strive to have, only men who, because in their own estimation they were supermen and so beyond good and evil, boasted in such titles as immoralist and atheist. (Greene, JR. 1919 [1918]:8)

That several of the critiques of religion stemmed from Germany, and that it was Germany which started the war, allowed for a view of the American support for the Allies as a fight against irreligion. The Christian cartoonist Ernest James Pace drew a picture of the Bible as a boat floating on the waters of unbelief and attacked by a German submarine, which under the banner “The Judas 2” has the imprint: “Modern ‘Higher Criticism’ Made in Germany” (picture as printed in Davis 2005:256). And the “Baseball Evangelist” Billy Sunday, who was one of the most popular preachers of these days, summed the conflict up as: “I tell you it is Bill against Woodrow, Germany against America, Hell against Heaven.” (as cited in Hankins 2015:77)14

So, it was not just the cruelties of the war or the concern for the “peace and safety,” but also the “paganism” of the German culture that caused strong feelings against Germany and its confederates. The term pagan stands for a “heathen,” for “a follower of a polytheistic religion,” someone “who has little or no religion and who delights in sensual pleasures and material goods” or “an irreligious or hedonistic person” (Merriam-Webster s.a.a). The term derived from Latin paganus, which towards the end of the Roman Empire was used to name practitioners of religions other than Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. In Latin, the term originally meant “country dweller” or “civilian.” According to Merriam Webster, the religious meanings of the term stem either from the fact that non-Christian practices remained stronger outside of the cities, or because early Christians referred to themselves as “soldiers of Christ,” which puts nonbelievers on the other side of their war (Merriam-Webster s.a.q).

But while the atrocities of the war were linked to irreligion, the right to claim Conscientious Objection exemption from the military and to refrain from the war was granted not on behalf of political or philosophical morality, but limited to those who could claim religious reasons. Although many among the pacifists in Europe and the United States were humanists, anarchists, socialists, and other nonreligious people, and although one of the most widely noticed actions for

14 “Bill,” here refers to the emperor Wilhelm II.
peace was the open letter of the British philosopher and agnostic Bertrand Russell to president Wilson, Congress passed a law that limited the right to claim Conscientious Objection exemption to members of traditional peace churches only. Not holding a religious belief automatically disqualified one for exemption from military service (Patterson 2014:14–15). The landmark decision to expand the possibility for Conscientious Objection beyond the traditional peace churches explicitly stated “There is no issue here of atheistic beliefs, and, accordingly, the decision does not deal with that question” (United States v. Seeger [1965]). However, today the Department of Defense extends such a possibility to a “deeply held religious, moral, or ethical belief.” Such “beliefs should be valued with the strength and devotion of traditional religious conviction.” However, it “does not include a belief that rests solely upon considerations of policy, pragmatism, expediency, or political views” (Department of Defense 2017).

The Second Coming of the Anti-Christ—World War II and the Holocaust

When in the Second World War, Germany (again) threatened the world, in the beginning Americans were (again) hesitant to step in. When Roosevelt advocated for an American involvement, it was not just the unimaginable German cruelty and its will to subdue the world, but (again) the perceived “paganism” of the Germans that he deployed to convince isolationist, neutralist, and pacifist Americans. Although Roosevelt was less overtly religious than many of his predecessors, his arguments became more religious the closer the war came. When he proclaimed an unlimited national emergency on May 27, 1941, he depicted the Nazis as a threat to American’s “right of worship”:

The Nazi world does not recognize any God except Hitler; for the Nazis are as ruthless as the Communists in the denial of God. What place has religion which preaches the dignity of the human being, the majesty of the human soul, in a world where moral standards are measured by treachery and bribery and fifth columnists? Will our children, too, wander off, goosestepping in search of new gods? (Roosevelt s.a. [1941])

Although even Hitler spoke of the “protection of Christianity as the basis of our morality” (Hitler s.a. [1933], translation: PK) after he was appointed chancellor, although the majority of the Nazis were Christians (Puschner and Vollnhals 2012:21), and although atheists were loathed by the SS as “arrogant, megalomaniacal, and dumb” (Himmler 1937:s.p.), Roosevelt constructed a struggle
“between pagan brutality and the Christian ideal” (Roosevelt s.a. [1941]). In his *State of the Union Address* in 1942 he stated that the Nazis have now announced their plan for enforcing their new German, pagan religion all over the world—a plan by which the Holy Bible and the Cross of Mercy would be displaced by Mein Kampf and the swastika and the naked sword. (Roosevelt s.a. [1942])

Although war propaganda was less religiously infused in the Second World War then in the First, to connect the German atrocities to their alleged irreligion and opposition to Christianity was a common motive. Pictures showed Nazis driving a knife through the Bible or trampling on a church in gigantic boots. Others showed the Bible and Hitler’s Mein Kampf and asked “Which book? Your war effort will decide.” (Garfield O’Brien and Baker s.a.) Through this polarization between Nazis and fascism on the one hand and Christian patriotism on the other, the nonreligious were associated with treason and anti-patriotism. The United States, once again, self-identified as a fundamentally Christian nation.

Some Christians even thought that the war was God’s punishment for the disbelief of the modern time or for liberal theology. In a resolution of the Louisville Convention in 1942, Lutheran leaders stated that “God has been left out of the lives of men,” and “Therefore, mankind is reaping the harvest of its apostasy, in judgment, discipline, and vicarious suffering” (as cited in Sittser 2010:4). The term *apostasy* comes from Greek *aphistasthai*, which means “to revolt.” Today it stands for “an act of refusing to continue to follow, obey, or recognize a religious faith” or “abandonment of a previous loyalty” and “defection” (Merriam-Webster s.a.f). Such thinking left the unreligious not only on the wrong side of the front lines but also portrayed them as a cause of the war.

In hindsight it seems incredibly ignorant that Roosevelt called for the defense of Christianity against irreligion while in Europe Jews were being killed on an industrial scale by Nazis who were driven by an anti-Semitism, which had its roots in the Christian anti-Judaist prejudice (Junginger 15)

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15 According to historian Charles Richter (2015:301), Roosevelt by telling the American people about Hitler’s plan to abolish all existing religions, has relied on documents which turned out to be a British forgery.
In addition, American churches showed an ambivalent relationship towards the events in Europe and the Jewish refugees. According to historian Gerald Lawson Sittser the churches were so preoccupied with their concerns about the plight of Christians in Europe that they did not bother to help the Jews. Anti-Semitism, apathy, and the refusal to believe the reports of German mass killings played their part, too (Sittser 2010:215). The persecution of Jews in Europe had been covered in the Christian press since the 1930s, and anti-Semitism was officially condemned, although frequently as un-Christian (Sittser 2010:211–213). The Federal Council of the Churches, for example, called it “contrary to the spirit and the teachings of Christ” (as cited in Sittser 2010:212). Jacques Maritain, a French Catholic scholar who resided in the United States during the war, even went as far as to write that Nazi anti-Semitism

seeks to wipe the race of Christ from the face of the earth because it seeks to wipe Christ from human history, it takes vengeance on the Jews for the Messiah who issued from them, it humiliates and tortures the Jews, seeking to humiliate and torture their Messiah in their flesh; it is essentially a Christophobia. (as cited in Sittser 2010:213)

What becomes obvious here is that even in the acts of solidarity with European Jews, many Christians saw the German atrocities primarily as a religious problem that targets Christian dominance and only secondarily as a humanitarian problem that targeted and killed Jews as people. Some of the more fundamentalist Christians even interpreted the Holocaust and Zionism as parts of their dispensationalist theology, or evangelized Jews because they thought “that the greatest gift they could offer to Jews was the Gospel” (Sittser 2010:215–216). Here it becomes clear that religious zeal, placed over human concerns, can turn into the crudest and most cynical thought.

After the war, when the horror of the concentration camps has been revealed in its full scale, Protestant fundamentalist journal Watchman-Examiner even found a way of making sense out of it:

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16 Historian Horst Junginger points out that the differentiation between religious and racist prejudice is misleading because there have been elements of what would later be called racism in early anti-Judaist practices. Furthermore, because “race” is a construction for which no somatic evidence was found, the NS-state usually relied on the criterion of baptism and baptism of one’s ancestors in order to classify someone as Arian or as part of the Jewish “race” Junginger (2011:6–46).
Jewish sufferings of the past few years will in the end prove divine compulsion driving an apostate people out of their ghettos in order that they might ultimately arrive in the land which God originally gave to their fathers.

And in regard to the Jew as apostate, he added:

While he is out of his own land and unconverted, the Jew is a stumbling block to the Gentiles. It is the purpose of God, and not any international act of the Jews themselves, which has made Israel—as the nation which has most definitely rejected Christ—a token to other nations. (as cited in Marty 1996:63)

Here, again, theological principal overrules human consideration—with which no sense could be made out of the Holocaust. Connecting the Holocaust to the Jewish apostasy, implicitly made the Jews responsible for their suffering and connecting it to God’s will legitimized it. In that line of thinking, the perceived failure of the Jews to accept Christ made it a godly act to kill them. The term *Gentile* stands for a “person of a non-Jewish nation or of non-Jewish faith” and especially “a Christian as distinguished from a Jew” (Merriam-Webster s.a.k). While the term is used also for “heathen” or “pagan,” when used by a Christian like this, it creates a dichotomic distinction between the Jews and all other nations, which reproduces an anti-Semitic pattern.

While the Second World War was underway and Japanese Americans—whose polytheist country of origin fought in the “unholy” (Roosevelt 1941) alliance with Germany—were deported to camps, they too, received not only practical and public support from American Christians, but were also ministered to, with evangelists traveling from camp to camp in order to help the Japanese to find to Christ (Sittser 2010:171–176).

**Scaring the Reds—Communists and Anarchists**

The other “menaces” to religious America were lawless anarchism and godless communism. The Red Scares have often been interpreted as nativism or anti-alienism (see Preston 1963, Coben 1964, Richter 2015). But this interpretation seems to underestimate the role of religion and

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17 The term can also mean non-Mormon Merriam-Webster (s.a.k), but this is obviously not meant here.
atheism in the fear of communism, as well as in the propaganda efforts to fight it.\textsuperscript{19} As was already the case in the First and Second World Wars, the threat during the Cold War felt most severely was that of irreligion against Christianity. However, if in the two world wars the enemies were branded as pagan and irreligious although they, too, were convinced that God was on their side, labeling the anarchists, socialists, and communists as atheist was in a way correct. Most of them understood themselves as atheist, because there is a connection between questioning authority, questioning the political system, and questioning religion. The concept of a transcendent ultimate authority that sets the rules for humans was contradictory to their concept of the liberation of humans from all sorts of authority. Communist philosopher Karl Marx’ famous dictum of religion as the “\textit{opium of the people}” (2009 [1844]:s.p.) and anarchist Emma Goldman, who did not believe in God because she “\textit{believe[d] in man}” (s.a. [1931]:139), may illustrate that.

Marx saw God as created by humans—not the other way around:

This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d’honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion. (Marx 2009 [1844]:s.p.)

For Marx, religion is part of the superstructure that evolves as an expression of the economic base. “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions.” For him, religion was an illusion that stood in the way of people’s fight

\textsuperscript{19} The monumental book \textit{The American Inquisition 1945-1960} interestingly uses religious terminology, but does that under the assumption that “both Americanism and Communism are religions” Belfrag (1973:16). In order to understand the relationship between religion and atheism, it is therefore of limited applicability. The same holds true for the attempts to explain anti-atheism as nativism. While a certain historical development, like the Red Scare, might be explained through a number of factors of which nativism is an important one, anti-atheism in general cannot be explained through a substitute. In order to be understood properly, it has to be studied in its own right—as a stance towards people who do not believe in God.
for liberation. People would never be able to reach their freedom in this world if they waited for salvation in the afterlife:

The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo. (Marx 2009 [1844]:s.p.)

Goldman, even more than Marx, saw the fight against religion as indispensable part of the struggle for liberation. Although she criticized religion in general, she detested Christianity the most. She wrote that the Christian norms of poverty and of non-resistance to evil were the most effective—because the most subtle—measures against rebellion and liberation from capitalism and repression. For her, the gospel of Christ stands for submission, inertia, and the denial of life:

In decrying the body as something evil, the flesh as the tempter to everything that is sinful, man has mutilated his being in the vain attempt to keep his soul pure, while his body rotted away from the injuries and tortures inflicted upon it.

For Goldman, Christianity keeps the poor from taking their future in their own hands. It holds them down by postponing their hopes to the hereafter:

The Christian religion and morality extols the glory of the Hereafter, and therefore remains indifferent to the horrors of the earth. Indeed, the idea of self-denial and of all that makes for pain and sorrow is its test of human worth, its passport to the entry into heaven. Goldman s.a. [1913] #587}

But not only was their critique of religion important for most of the communists and anarchists themselves, it also was one of the major concerns of their persecutors. Already the assassination of President William McKinley in 1901 was attributed to the anarchist assassinator’s atheism (Richter 2015:297–298). During the so-called First Red Scare, which ran rampant after the First World War and reached its peak in 1919-20, that was clearly expressed. Ole Hanson, the former mayor of Seattle (where a general strike for higher wages took place in 1919), even turned his warnings against radicals into a book. In Americanism versus Bolshevism, he was not just voicing the
economic or nativist fears, but connected those fears to the godlessness of the unionists. About the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.)^{20} he wrote:

> The teaching and advocacy of sabotage, force, violence, theft, and arson, has blunted and oftentimes destroyed the moral sense of the organization’s members. They teach non-observance of all law, ridicule morality, advocate godlessness, and are made to believe that everything done by them is right. The I. W. W. publish and sing songs filled with sacrilege and hatred, songs reeking of the mire, glorifying crime, encouraging revolt, debauching the hearer, and ridiculing God and good, and all that is sweet and dear to true men and women everywhere. (Hanson s.a. [1920]:219)

It is interesting that he uses the word “sacrilege” here. A *sacrilege* is “a technical and not necessarily intrinsically outrageous violation (as improper reception of a sacrament) of what is sacred because consecrated to God” or a “gross irreverence toward a hallowed person, place, or thing” (Merriam-Webster s.a.u). For Hanson, the protest of the I.W.W. is a violation of a holy entity. His cure for that is Americanism, which he sets in direct moral and religious opposition to Bolshevism:

> Americanism has taught and Americans have practised morality; Bolshevism teaches and its votaries practise immorality, indecency, cruelty, rape, murder, theft, arson. Americanism stands for God and good; Bolshevism is against both God and good. (Hanson s.a. [1920]:284)

So, while this could be understood as a kind of nativism, it would be a deep obliviousness to ignore the religious dimension of it. “These teachings,” Hanson goes on, “have destroyed in the minds of thousands the desire to work and produce. They have made infidels of the God-fearing; they have made criminals of the law-abiding.” (Hanson s.a. [1920]:288) Here, it becomes clear that he not only associates irreligion with theft, murder and rape, but in general loathes all kind of disobedience to authority, of which the law is one, but God is another. Being moral, law-abiding and god-fearing for him creates an inseparable unit. In reverse, that associates the nonreligious with criminality and civil disobedience. Furthermore, he seems to imagine a conspiracy that has

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^{20} It is actually debated among historians if the I.W.W. were in their entirety critical of religion. Historian Bruce Watson states that the slogan “No God! No Master!” was only slipped in at one of their rallies during their march in Lawrence in 1912 Watson (2006:225).
“made infidels of the God-fearing.” That people stop believing out of their own considerations seems beyond his imagination.

The First Red Scare culminated in the Palmer Raids and the deportation of 249 so-called “radicals” to Russia. Among the aliens, of which most were of Jewish descent, was Emma Goldman. The ship they were deported on was named the “Red Ark” by the press of the time (Jacoby 2005:242). The Evening Mail commented: “Just as the sailing of the Ark that Noah built was a pledge for the preservation of the human race, so the sailing of the Ark of the Soviet is a pledge for the preservation of America.” (as cited in Murray 1980:208) Alexander Mitchell Palmer, the Attorney General of the United States who took responsibility for the raids, defended them in his The Case against the ‘Reds’ as follows:

Like a prairie-fire, the blaze of revolution was sweeping over every American institution of law and order a year ago. It was eating its way into the homes of the American workmen, its sharp tongues of revolutionary heat were licking the altars of the churches, leaping into the belfry of the school bell, crawling into the sacred corners of American homes, seeking to replace marriage vows with libertine laws, burning up the foundations of society. (Palmer s.a. [1920])

Here, too, the nativist and anti-Semitic “defense” of America had strong religious undertones. Godless communism was portrayed as a dangerous natural force which is going to destroy American religion. And deportation was seen as the appropriate measure against it.

**The Hot War—McCarthyism**

This religious, anti-atheist trait of anti-communism became even more obvious through the so-called Second Red Scare. During the Second World War, the fight against communism was conducted primarily rhetorically because the fight against Nazism had priority and the Soviet Union was an ally against Germany and the Axis powers. Nevertheless, when after the war the Soviet Union had emerged as the second big superpower in the world, American fear concentrated on communism again.

The man who gave the persecution of communists its name was the Catholic Senator of Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy. In his speech, delivered on Lincoln’s birthday ceremony in 1950, he offered insight into the mindset of the era’s most rigid anti-communists. He proclaimed that
the Cold War is “not the usual war between nations for land areas or other material gains, but a war between two diametrically opposed ideologies.” He stated that America could live “in peace” with the economic and political differences between the two systems, if it weren’t for the religious difference:

The real, basic difference, however, lies in the religion of immoralism… invented by Marx, preached feverishly by Lenin, and carried to unimaginable extremes by Stalin. This religion of immoralism, if the Red half of the world triumphs […] will more deeply wound and damage mankind than any conceivable economic or political system. […] Today we are engaged in a final, all-out battle between communistic atheism and Christianity. (McCarthy 2004:340)21

For McCarthy the (non)religious aspect is the most central part of this fight. He even goes as far as to say that the grave violations of Human Rights in form of the “one-party police state” in the Soviet Union were acceptable, if it were not for the religious and moral conflict.

McCarthy had noisy support from religious leaders of the time. Billy Graham, the rising star in America after the Second World War and often called “America’s pastor,” expounded a radically different explanation for the state of the world than the communists and anarchists. He stated that the race problem, poverty, war and crime are just symptoms of a disease that is rooted in men itself: “and that disease is called S-I-N, sin!” (Graham s.a. [1958]) If people would only repent, everything would get better. With God’s help. The evil in the world therefore is not rooted in an unjust organization and power structure, but in the failure of humans to obey religious norms. The term *sin* can stand for “an often serious shortcoming” or “an action that is or is felt to be highly reprehensible.” But it also bears explicitly religious connotations as it means “an offense against religious or moral law,” a “transgression of the law of God,” or “a vitiated state of human nature in which the self is estranged from God.” (Merriam-Webster s.a.y) In such a view, the nonreligious, the sinful, and those who do not repent are made responsible for all the evil in the world.

21 There exist gravely different versions of the speech. Apparently, McCarthy revised not only the number of communist spies from 205 to 56 but also altered some of the cited paragraphs (see McCarthy (1950) vs McCarthy (s.a. [1950])).
But furthermore, the nonreligious not only violate God’s rules, they also question the whole system they were based on. During the Cold War, this amounted to an apocalyptic scenario, in which Christianity and the good in the world were endangered. Graham preached a Manichean worldview. There was no middle ground, no bridge, no grey area: “Either communism must die, or Christianity must die.” (Graham s.a. [1954]:41)

It is interesting to note, that in the 1950s the standard opposition changed from Bolshevism versus Americanism to communism versus Christianity. The distinction was not made between two political and economic systems but between religion and atheism. Rather, as historian Thomas Aiello has pointed out, religion has forged and shaped anti-communism to the extent that the conflict appeared to be a religious battle (Aiello 2005).

Communism was also often perceived as a religion of its own—but, of course, as a false one. Graham even depicts communism as Satan’s religion. Although the materialist approach of Marx focusses on the economy as the base of society, Graham focusses on communism’s anti-religion stance:

Everything it teaches, every strategic move it makes, every philosophy it advocates is designed to strip Jehovah God of His deity, rob Him of His holiness, and reduce Him to the proportions of a heartless, shapeless, and meaningless god. (Graham s.a. [1954]:41)

He draws that offense back to Adam and Eve, who were seduced by the devil:

Satan began his revolution in the Garden of Eden. [...] Today Communism is the medium through which he operates to dupe, deceive, and delude that large segment of society which has chosen to believe a lie. The Devil is their god; Marx, their prophet; Lenin, their saint; and Malenkov their high priest. Denying their faith in all ideologies except their religion of revolution, these diabolically inspired men seek in devious and various ways to convert a peaceful world to their doctrine of death and destruction. (Graham s.a. [1954]:41–42)

In Graham’s worldview, the human heart is made to embrace religion. If it does not accept Christianity, it falls to some other—false—ideology. “Today millions are embracing the false religion of Communism.” (Graham s.a. [1954]:42) In order to be human, for Graham, people have to believe in God. Godless communists he calls “rats and termites” (Graham s.a. [1954]:46).
This obsession with atheism definitely goes beyond nativism. Graham’s anti-alien views are bound to the perception of aliens as irreligious. He connects communism to European and especially German philosophy, but since the age of Higher Criticism and Idealistic philosophy, this stands as a marker for religious doubt:

Karl Marx — a subtle, clever, degenerate materialist — authored this philosophy of world socialism. Having filled his intellectual craw with all the filth of Europe’s gutters, and garbling perverted German philosophies and half-truths, he spewed this filthy, corrupt, ungodly, unholy doctrine of world socialism over the gullible peoples of a degenerate Europe. Because it seemed new, different, and revolutionary, and because Central Europe had turned from the faith of their fathers, the Communistic contagion spread like wildfire.

In his indistinct hatred of European philosophy, Graham even associates communism with the “survival of the fittest” (Graham s.a. [1954]:44–45). Asked how to fight communism, he recommends “old-fashioned Americanism.” But this Americanism, for him, is defined through the “dignity of the individual, a faith in God, an adherence to the Bible, and a respect for human life” (Graham s.a. [1954]:45). For him, “The greatest and most effective weapon against Communism today is to be born again Christian” (Graham s.a. [1954]:46). Through the association of the enemy with atheism, America and religion were conflated in a way that made religious faith a reflection of proper patriotism, as historian Dianne Kirby has pointed out (Kirby 2006:298).

Billy Graham was by no means alone in his hatred of atheism. Billy James Hargis, another extremely popular conservative preacher, in his Christian Crusade praised capitalism as Christian, prayed for the fall of atheist regimes and hoped for their replacement through “Christian governments” (as cited in Aiello 2005)—a goal that did play a significant role in United States foreign policy during the Cold War (Gunn and Slighoua 2011; Schäfer). Episcopal theologian Tolbert Robert Ingram, even went as far as to argue that the Ninth Commandment demands full disclosure of communist suspicions to the public. Obviously, religion sought to play its role in politics and the shaping of foreign as well as domestic policy.

Religion influenced politics on the highest level possible. President Eisenhower, who himself only started to go to church in the 1950s (Aiello 2005), famously announced in 1952: “Our form
of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply-felt religious faith, and I don’t care what it is.” (as cited in Richter 2015:301–302) Later he actually did qualify this “deeply held religious faith” as “a belief in God” (Eisenhower s.a. [1958]). In the Cold War, religious aims and political institutions became inseparably intertwined. Richard Nixon, member of the House Committee on Un-American Activities and later president himself, in 1952 saw Western freedom tied to Biblical Christianity. The only hope against “the netherworld of deceit, subversion, and espionage which is the Communist conspiracy,” for him, is “a faith based not on materialism but on a recognition of God” (as cited in Aiello 2005). And for J. John Edgar Hoover, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the American Ideal “is woven of a thousand things,” of which an “unfaltering faith in God” is the first one:

The American ideal has its roots in religion. Without its religious sanction and inspiration, the American ideal would pale and wither to extinction. It is the American precept that men shall live as equals under a government by law, which is embodied in the greatest of all laws. (Hoover 1957:100)

The connection of godlessness with the Cold War-enemy created a climate in which atheism or the critique of Christianity was linked to communism, while communism was identified as the biggest political threat of the time, and its real and alleged proponents or sympathizers were politically persecuted. While certainly most communists were atheists, by no means all atheists were communists (Jacoby 2005:231–232). Nevertheless, their lack of faith rendered them suspicious.

The equation of Americanism with a theistic religious faith—be it Christian, the newer notion of Judeo-Christian or even Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish (Herberg 1960 [1955])—became most obvious in the change of national symbols. In 1954, the “One nation” of the Pledge of Allegiance was complemented with “Under God,” as a result of a public campaign led by the Catholic laymen’s association The Knights of Columbus, and the national motto was changed from “E Pluribus Unum” to “In God We Trust” in 1956 (Kirby 2006:298; Jacoby 2005:308). Through that, being religious became connected to American identity even more closely. For atheists that caused not only practical problems—like what to do while everyone else is pledging allegiance to a “nation under God.” Tying Americanism to religion also symbolically brought in to question their allegiance to the nation. It became a metaphor for good versus evil, and reinforced the idea
that America had a divine right. But that metaphor at the same time placed the nonreligious outside the definition of citizenship (Aiello 2005).

**America’s Most Hated Minority—Courts for the Separation of Church and State**

That some remarkable Supreme Court decisions in favor of the separation of church and state and the rights of nonbelievers occurred at a time when American identity and politics were so closely linked to religion (Schmidt 2016:249–250) says less about the political climate than it says about how far removed American culture was from the ideas of the Constitution. In 1948, Vashti McCollum, Humanist and mother of a ten-year-old child, had filed a lawsuit against the so-called “released time” rules in Illinois. Pupils of public schools would get time released from regular classes for religious education, which was taught by Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish teachers and took place on the school grounds. Pupils who were not signed up for one of the religious classes were not released from school, but had to leave the classrooms to go to some other place to do regular classwork. McCollum’s son was severely derided by other students for not choosing one of the religion classes (Jacoby 2005:292–294). The court, in *McCollum v. Board of Education*, ruled in favor of McCollum that the released time-system violated the First Amendment, which is applicable also to the States through the Fourteenth Amendment:

> Here not only are the state’s taxsupported (sic!) public school buildings used for the dissemination of religious doctrines. The State also affords sectarian groups an invaluable aid in that it helps to provide pupils for their religious classes through use of the state’s compulsory public school machinery. This is not separation of Church and State. (United States Supreme Court s.a.[1948])

The justices referred to *Everson v. Board of Education*, a recent case about the legitimacy of busing children to parochial schools. There it had been declared that “[i]n the words of Jefferson, the clause against establishment of religion by law was intended to erect ‘a wall of separation between Church and State.’” (United States Supreme Court s.a. [1947]) According to the Supreme Court, this wall was not crossed by busing children to religious schools, but was crossed by teaching religion in public schools.
After McCollum filed the lawsuit, her son was beaten up and had to be sent to a private school for his own protection. The “Atheist Mother,” as McCollum was called, received hate mail like this:

You would look so cute without an eye to offend you and without a tongue to offend me and mine… We will make some lovely incisions in your filthy bellies and pull out those nervous guts one by one, slow and easy. Just like the awful treatment you worldly ones have meted out to us generation after generation. (as cited in Jacoby 2005:293–294)

Or:

You probably had your child before you married if you are married. What you need is someone to beat the hell out of you. (as cited in Schmidt 2016:270)

Here, one can see not only how the topic could inflame those within the religious community but also how—even at the height of religious influence upon politics—nonreligious deviance was perceived as a threat. The senders of the hate mail were picturing nonreligion as a dominant force that has treated the religious awfully. This idea of an unjustified attack by atheists on religion even extended to renowned scholars. As Susan Jacoby has pointed out, even Martin E. Marty, who once had described how the churches were using the image of the infidel as a “scarecrow” in the debate about church and state (Marty 2012 [1961]:202), now painted a picture of McCollum as well as other freethinkers as militant troublemakers (Jacoby 2005:294). In fact, Marty portrayed her as an obnoxious woman who turned a mouse into an elephant (see Marty 1996:225–227)—despite the fact that she won her case in the Supreme Court.

After years of paranoia and political persecution of godless communists, the political climate for atheists had changed only slightly by the beginning of the 1960s. With the election of John F. Kennedy, America had for the first time a Catholic president. In order to temper Protestant’s century old fear of Catholics, Kennedy displayed a strong commitment to the separation of church and state. He reminded his voters that this belonged to the founding principles of the United States and was first erected in order to protect the Protestant minorities. Not an eager churchgoer himself, Kennedy was aware of the fine differentiations between not attending church and being an atheist: “I believe in an America,” he stated, “where religious intolerance will someday end—where all men and all churches are treated as equal—where every man has the
same right to attend or not attend the church of his choice” (Kennedy s.a. [1960]). Those sentences were remarkable secular for an American politician. However, by claiming tolerance for those who do not attend the church of their choice, he technically did not include people who do not choose a church at all but were atheists or belonged to a non-Christian religion.

How sensitive that topic still was, was made clear by his opponent Richard Nixon, who is quoted saying:

> There is only one way that I can visualize religion being a legitimate issue in an American political campaign. That would be if one of the candidates for the Presidency had no religious beliefs. (as cited in LeBeau 2003:67)

So, even at a time when America was more tolerant than ever before, this religious tolerance was not extended to atheists.

Nevertheless, the early 1960s saw more Supreme Court rulings on behalf of atheists and religious minorities. The first one dealt with the question of religious test oaths. Since the states have written their own constitutions, many had religious tests in place, although most of them were nondenominational and accepted diverse beliefs as long as they included God or a supreme being. Roy Torasco, an atheist, who was appointed Notary Public by the Governor of Maryland, refused to declare such a belief in God. He was therefore denied a commission. After taking his case to the Supreme Court, the court ruled in *Torasco v. Watkins* that there “is, and can be, no dispute about the purpose or effect of the Maryland Declaration of Rights requirement before us—it sets up a religious test.” As such, a test would bar people who refuse to declare their belief in a God from holding office, the state’s power and authority “is put on the side of one particular sort of believers—those who are willing to say they believe in ‘the existence of God’” (United States Supreme Court 1961). Therefore, the court ruled that the religious test violates the First and Fourteenth Amendment.

The next landmark case involved school prayer: After the ACLU had successfully protested Christian school prayer, New York’s Union Free School District No. 9, developed the so-called *Regents’ Prayer*: “Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers and our Country.” Supported by the New York Civil Liberties Union, a group of parents filed a lawsuit against the school district, because they feared
that their children would be ostracized in school for not participating in the prayer (Jacoby 2005:320–321). In his 1962 decision *Engel v. Vitale*, the Supreme Court decided that

state officials may not compose an official state prayer and require that it be recited in the public schools of the State at the beginning of each school day—even if the prayer is denominationally neutral and pupils who wish to do so may remain silent or be excused from the room while the prayer is being recited. (United States Supreme Court 1962)

The argument was that even if pupils were not forced to actually take part, having an official school prayer was violating the *Establishment-Clause*.

But the most well-known decision was only about to come. In 1960, Madalyn Murray O’Hair, a Second World War veteran and atheist who later founded the American Atheists organization, filed a lawsuit against the school board that had established Bible reading in her son’s school. The case was brought to the Supreme Court together with a case where a Unitarian Universalist family filed for the same reason. In 1963, the Court decided in *Abington School Dist. v. Schempp together with Murray v. Curlett* that

no state law or school board may require that passages from the Bible be read or that the Lord’s Prayer be recited in the public schools of a State at the beginning of each school day—even if individual students may be excused from attending or participating in such exercises upon written request of their parents. (United States Supreme Court 1963)

Together with *McCollum v. Board of Education*, these Supreme Court decisions were seen as an attack on Christianity by many of the religious. Los Angeles Cardinal James Francis McIntyre complained that “the court presumes to deny the children of God in our schools the opportunity to speak to the Creator, the Lawmaker, the Preserver of mankind” (as cited in Jacoby (2005:321). This interpretation is interesting, because it suggests that it was forbidden for pupils to pray, while the rulings actually outlawed rituals which in any form “require” them to pray (United States Supreme Court 1963). So, while the ruling actually frees pupils from religious coercion, the religious reactions suggested that it is just another form of coercion. Here, the end of force is interpreted as force in itself—a rhetorical strategy that will be used more often in the future. Religious tolerance seems to end where an individual’s “freedom” is no longer framed within religious terms, but rather in demands to be free of religion. If conforming to religious norms is
not mandatory, this is depicted as an enforcement of secularism or atheism upon people and, hence, as an attack.

The most common critique of the Supreme Court ruling in the cases of *Schempp* and *Murray* was, as a reader of the popular *Life* magazine put it, that Americans shouldn’t be “stamped into complete secularization of our schools and other public institutions by denying to the majority the right to read and study the greatest book ever written.” Another reader wrote that “to abolish an opening exercise thanking God for our great country would be submitting to the will of a small, radical minority” (both as cited in LeBeau 2003:86). Mark Murphy, the vice-president of Citizens for Educational Freedom, even went as far as to state that the decision was “another step toward the elimination of God from all public American life” (as cited in LeBeau 2003:94).

There are several remarkable points in these reactions: The first is that a country whose founding myth is based on the freedom of religious minorities now claimed the rights of the majority with regard to people who do not believe. Not making religion mandatory in public institutions is seen as a fight against religion. The second is that, in a nation in which religious dissenters frequently demanded secularism as a means to secure their freedom, secularism is now seen as sectarian—as an ideology that stands opposed to religion, instead of an equal treatment not just of religion and nonreligion but also of different religions. However, perhaps most interesting is the use of the word *public*. The term has a double meaning of being related to the majority—open and perceptible—and of being related to the government. But in regard to religious norms, these are completely different things. Banning something from the public in the sense that it is not mandatory in public institutions anymore is not the same as banning something from the public in the sense that it is banned from “all public American life.” The one is taking the state’s force out of it; the other would be to ban any expression of it in the public sphere. Of course, students were not banned from praying, or from praying in public. What was banned is to make prayer an official exercise, which thereby is enforced by a state institution.

It is this loss of normative power over society as a whole that Christians, particularly white Evangelical Christians, have reacted strongly against. When their absolute dominance dwindled in favor of rules that allowed for a variety of religious and nonreligious expressions, they perceived this as discrimination. And that perception remains the dominant one today. According to a study of the Public Religion Research Institute, white Evangelical Protestants believe that
Christians in the United States experience more discrimination than Muslims (Cox and Jones 2017).\footnote{22}{Unfortunately, the study did not ask for the perceived discrimination against atheists.}

Her lawsuit, together with her critical thought and aggressive style, earned Madalyn Murray O’Hair the title of “The Most Hated Woman in America” (as cited in LeBeau 2003:118). As opposed to the many civil liberties groups and even the freethought societies at the time, which focused on claims of freedom of thought and separation of church and state (Jacoby 2005:295–297), Murray O’Hair actually was against religion—maybe even as much as religious people were against her. She stated that religion dictates how much tax you pay, what food you eat and when, with whom you sleep, if you should have children, if you die in a concentration camp, if you are segregated in some manner from other human beings, what you read, what movies you see, and what you should or should not believe about life. Religion is politics and always the most reactionary politics. (as cited in LeBeau 2003:104)

At a time when most Americans were openly against atheism, and were so with support from the highest political offices, being against religion was seen as militant and as an offense towards the believer’s rights. This, again, reveals a double standard.

The Murrays paid a high price for their outspokenness: William, Madalyn’s son who refused to take part in school prayer, was taunted by his fellow students as well as by the school faculty; he was even pushed in front of a bus (LeBeau 2003:47–48). Their family cat was murdered; their house and car damaged, and they had ongoing trouble with the police and the courts (LeBeau 2003:110–121). Their lawyer stated that, as atheists were not allowed to witness in courts in Maryland, the Murrays would “not even be permitted to testify in their own defense” (as cited in LeBeau 2003:115).\footnote{23}{The cruel murder of Murray O’Hair and her family, however, was not due to anti-atheist hate. It seemed to have purely economic and personal interests. Nevertheless, the police in Austin, Texas, has been is criticized for major shortfalls in the investigation (see Bryce (1999)).}
But the larger threat to the Christian control over society did not come from organized atheists like Murray O’Hair and her supporters. Compared to the Student Movement, the New Left, the Beats, the Hippies, and growing new forms of spirituality, the atheists were rather marginal.

**Atheist Religions—The Counterculture and its Spirituality**

The counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s definitely created a break in the religious understanding of a whole generation. John Lennon was not the only one to imagine that “there’s no heaven,” and Jimi Hendrix called music his religion. For many, Woodstock and the lifestyle that peaked in that period contained a “spiritual” quality. The term *spiritual* means “of, relating to, consisting of, or affecting the spirit […] sacred matters […] supernatural beings or phenomena.” Furthermore, it describes something or someone as “ecclesiastical rather than lay or temporal,” “concerned with religious values,” or “related or joined in spirit” (Merriam-Webster s.a.z). Hence, spirituality is obviously somehow related to religion, but is not the same. “Spiritual but not religious” became a frequent self-identification among Americans.

Spirituality outside of the church goes back to the early colonies. However, during the liberal and critical 1960s, spiritualism reached a new high and gained a new dimension. Maybe the most interesting change for atheists was the widespread fascination with Eastern religions resp. philosophies. Hinduism and particularly Zen Buddhism were seen as an alternative to and a protest against stultifying and bourgeois American Christianity—not just among students, but among many, who were disillusioned with the Christian traditions (Fuller 2001:61–83).

Of course, the Hippies were not the first Westerners to discover Buddhism. With the discovery of what is called the Indo-European or Aryan language family during the 19th century and with a growing desire for a counterweight to Hinduism in colonial India, modern Buddhism was raised to the rank of a “world religion” and a friendly ally. For centuries before, Buddhism was considered paganism in the West: Christian missionaries saw it as well as Hinduism as idolatry. They called the Buddha an atheist and saw his teaching as a denial of life (Lopez, Jr.:754–756).

In fact, the Buddha has declared that there is no God and the tradition rejects the idea of a creator god, as exists in the Christian tradition. There are many gods and goddesses, and even forms between human and gods in the Buddhist universe, but there is no such thing as a jealous father that is so central in monotheist religions (Lopez, Jr.:735–740). If atheism and religion are
often seen as opposites—and are also often treated as opposites in this work—this is the result of the monotheist culture in the United States. Western, Judeo-Christian, and also Muslim traditions are used to define religion in a theist way.

However, I would argue that there is yet another rationale for the easy acceptance of Buddhism as a religion in the West. One of the reasons why ordinary atheists are so scary for many Christians is that they do not believe in an afterlife and, hence, lack the fear of a Judgement Day. The latter, often called “a state of future rewards or punishment,” was expressed early in American politics (Hutson 2008:110) and became enshrined, for example, in the constitutions of Pennsylvania and Tennessee, which exclude people who deny “the being of God, or a future state of rewards and punishments” (Constitution of the State of Tennessee 2014). While Buddhism rejects the concept of a monotheistic god, the Buddhist teaching of dharma and the circle of rebirths very much presents a state of future rewards and punishment. So, being considered to be a religion at all certainly helped atheist Buddhism over the disdain that non-Buddhist atheists have to endure. While the Hippies certainly have transformed the cultural landscape and the lifestyle of a whole generation, the changes that this enthusiasm for an atheist religion or for spirituality outside of religion had on the nonreligious were rather moderate.

Today, according to a PEW-study, about 15% of the American population identify as “spiritual but not religious.” Among atheists and agnostics the percentage is 34% and among those who answer the question for their religious affiliation with “nothing in particular” 39% consider themselves Spiritual but not religious. However, this does not mean that the spiritual but not religious part of the society leans towards atheism. In this 2012 study, 92% of those who see themselves as spiritual but not religious report a belief in God (Pew Research Center 2012:43–45).

In the Image of God—The Civil Rights Movement

The span from the post-war era to the late 1960s was also the time of the Civil Rights Movement. After the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, whites in the former Confederacy strongly resisted implementing equality—and often did so on religious grounds. This went as far as discussing if blacks should count as humans according to Christian teaching: Against the “Atheism, which […] erroneously teaches that all the bipeds, with articulate speech, the erect posture, a well developed hand and foot, and the ability to make and handle tools, are men,” the
racist demagogue Charles Charroll argued that only whites are born in the image of God (Carroll 1900:48). Based on the difference in appearance, he concludes that blacks cannot be humans and hence must be “apes” or “beasts”—at the same stage of God’s creation as plants and animals. He rejected the idea that blacks and whites were different races in one human species, because “In harmony with the teachings of the Mosaic Record, St. Paul says: ‘All flesh is not the same flesh: but there is one kind of flesh of men, another flesh of beasts, another of fishes, and another of birds.’” That makes him conclude “that there is no kinship between man and the animals; but that the kinship is between God and man” (Carroll 1900:48).

The popular writer Thomas Dixon, on the other hand, in his condemnation of agnosticism, atheism and infidelity, tells the story of a black prisoner that was “saved” by the words of a minister, because he, too, is created in the image of God: Jesus, so Dixon,

*died for man as man. He looked through all that which lies upon the outer surface and saw the immortal, the infinite, the divine capacities of this creature made in the image of God.\*

That, of course, did not alter the prisoner’s life-sentence. But it made the saved black man the best worker in the chain-gang (Dixon 1892:148–150). The tears that Dixon describes in the eyes of the minister in that story did not keep him from defending segregation. For him, real freedom can only be found in God anyway. To Robert Ingersoll’s critique, that religion means slavery, he responded:

*Slaves are not made free by law. Man only attains freedom as he attains it within. Therefore Jesus chose the only plan possible by which a world could be free. He lived and taught the truth in life. He knew that man is free only as he knows the truth. He knew that when man knows the truth he cannot be bound either by institutions, kings or priests. (Dixon 1892:117)*

The few successes that blacks and progressive whites reached during the Reconstruction period were overshadowed by the wave of violence directed toward them—one that soon gave way to black Codes and “Jim Crow” laws that segregated blacks from whites in almost every area of life. Numerous powerful and violent racist organizations were formed in the South that deprived blacks of property and of their voting rights while often working together with—or serving as—
local police officers, politicians, or ministers. The most well-known among them, the Ku-Klux-Klan, murdered thousands and wounded tens of thousands through lashings, lynching, arson and bombings. Few of the murderers ever faced trials and even fewer were convicted (Newton 2007:5–10). The Klan was a racist White Supremacy group, and its primary focus was to keep blacks from using the Civil Rights that were granted to them by the federal government. However, many members of the Klan understood themselves as on a holy mission. The group started out as a club of former confederate soldiers. While its early members dressed up in costumes in order to frighten blacks by pretending they were the ghosts of the Confederate war dead, with the growth of the group most members or defenders of the Klan took religion more seriously. While the Klan seemed to have been open to members of all religions during the Reconstruction era, as long as they were white and acknowledged the existence of God, it later limited membership to native Protestants. As William Simmons, under whose leadership the Klan took a more religious—and more successful—approach has put it:

We avow the distinction between the races of mankind as same has been decreed by the Creator, and we shall ever be true to the faithful maintenance of White Supremacy. (as cited in Newton 2007:38–39)

With this ideology, the Klan became a major national political organization. According to historian Michel Newton, membership rates in the 1920s were estimated between a little over two million up to almost nine million, with most estimates lying between three and five million members. About 40,000 of them were Protestant clergymen (Newton 2007:38–41). And, of course, atheism or religious indifference was seen as threat. Even missing church on Sundays could raise the Klan’s attention (Newton 2007:47).

24 Next to blacks, liberals and the religiously inattentive, the Klan also targeted Catholics and Jews. In a campaign against Charlie Chaplin’s film The Pilgrim, which, in several theaters, was cancelled after Klan-protests, the Pittsburgh Klan complained to Movie Weekly about the “bigoted, sacrilegious, untrue and disgraceful portrayal of the Protestant Church” and threatened, “no man, no movie house, no actor and no corporation can insult the Christian religion and get away with it” (as cited in Rice (2008:368)). Despite having themselves very successful movies like The Birth of a Nation, the Klan imagined that “Jewish money controls the movies, and the baleful influence of the papal hand is consequently felt throughout moviedom” (cited after Rice (2008:370)). While anti-Catholicism lost importance to the Klan during time, and under the lead of prominent Neo-Nazi David Ernest Duke also Catholics were encouraged to join the Klan, anti-Semitism reached new highs, when they announced war against what they later called ZOG—an abbreviation for “Zionist Occupation Government,” as which they imagined the federal government of
However, being Christian, Protestant, or even Baptist did not protect blacks—or whites who supported their cause—from racist violence. The Klan also targeted ministers and churches, for example, when Birmingham’s Sixteenth Street Baptist Church—a center of black social and political organization—was bombed in 1963, killing four young girls (Newton 2007:24). And as the famous Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. observed: “Eleven o’clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hours, in Christian America.” (King, Martin Luther, Jr. s.a. [1960])

Religion in general and the black churches in particular have been the most important resources and organizational structures in the Civil Rights Movement. As W. E. Burghardt Du Bois described it, the *Emancipation Proclamation* of 1863 was already seen as the coming of the Lord by many blacks (Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt 1935:122). The black churches were centers of the community, and many Civil Rights leaders were pastors or otherwise very active in the church and in the *Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (SCLC). For many, religion was the driving force in their activism. As King writes in his autobiography:

> We have the power to change America and give a kind of new vitality to the religion of Jesus Christ. And we can get those young men and women who’ve lost faith in the church to see that Jesus was a serious man precisely because he dealt with the tang of the human amid the glow of the Divine and that he was concerned about problems. He was concerned about bread; he opened and started Operation Breadbasket a long time ago. He initiated the first sit-in movement. The greatest revolutionary that history has ever known. (King, Martin Luther, Jr. 2000:351, original in italics)

However, not all blacks were convinced by the religion of Jesus Christ. In the early 1940’s in Charlestown Prison, an angry atheist—easing his drug-withdrawal with nutmeg and other prison cures—cursed the Christian God and Bible so badly that the other inmates called him “Satan.”

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25 About the difficult process of Southern churches to accept desegregation, see, for example, Edwards (2010).
Combining his own experiences with the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, he started to believe that whites were the devil race, and that they used Christianity to oppress blacks by teaching them that they had originated from heathen savages. Blacks were taught “to worship an alien God having the same blond hair, pale skin, and blue eyes as the slavemaster.” Christianity taught blacks that “black was a curse,” and pushed them into self-hate and weakness:

This white man’s Christian religion further deceived and brainwashed this ‘Negro’ to always turn the other cheek, and grin, and scrape, and bow, and be humble, and to sing, and to pray, and to take whatever was dished out by the devilish white man; and to look for his pie in the sky, and for his heaven in the hereafter, while right here on earth the slave-mast er white man enjoyed his heaven.

Once he was “saved” by his family and converted to the Nation of Islam, this angry atheist would become one of the most radical, eloquent, and controversial advocates for the fight against the oppression of blacks: Malcom X (see Malcom X and Haley 1966:238).

Through leaders like King and X, the Civil Rights and Black Power movements became strongly connected to religion in historical and cultural memory. But what is usually not mentioned is that many activists in the movements were nonreligious. Du Bois, who founded the Niagara Movement, A. Philip Randolph, the founder of the predominantly black union Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the playwright and poet James Baldwin, and playwright and journalist Lorraine Hansberry all made important and valuable contributions to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Among the younger activists, many were secular Jews, like Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, who were killed because they were seen as “atheist, Communist, nigger-loving Jew[s]” (as cited in Jacoby 2005:334) when they came to the aid of black farmers following a Klan-led attack on their church. According to Susan Jacoby, one of the reasons that the

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26 See, for example, in Williams (2003) or Chappell (2004). For an overview over a variety of national and international factors, structural and cultural aspects, as well as technological and personal factors for the development and success of the movement, see Morris (1999).

27 In the same incident James Earl Chaney, a black person, has been murdered after being severely tortured. When he was younger Chaney was a devout Catholic James Earl Chaney Foundation (s.a.), but I could not find reliable information about his religious affiliation at the time of the murder. However, as
involvement of nonreligious people was usually concealed was that it gave segregationists one more reasons to hate the movement. Another might be that for many religious people it was just not imaginable that a nonreligious person could be good and moral. One of King’s closest friends, his lawyer Stanley Levison, was a nonbelieving Jew. King, however, is reported to have said to him: “You believe in God, Stan. You just don’t know it.” (as cited in Jacoby 2005:331)

Black atheists today often point out that atheists are unsung heroes within the Civil Rights Movement. Norm R. Allen Jr., a black Humanist activist from the Institute for Science and Human Values, writes that “no one is discussing how their beliefs impacted their activism or intellectualism. People forget we are a diverse community. We are not monolithic.” (as cited in Mahoney 2012) But the invisibility of black atheists it is not just a problem of historical crediting. Black feminist atheist author and journalist Sikivu Hutchinson describes that

despite longstanding traditions of secular humanism, skepticism, and ‘freethought’ in African American intellectual discourse, atheism remains a largely taboo belief system in black communities. In most African American communities, atheism is akin to donning a white sheet and a Confederate Flag. In others it’s ostensibly tolerated yet whispered about, branded culturally incorrect and bad form if not outright sacrilege. (Hutchinson 2011:4)

According to a PEW-study from 2014, only two percent of blacks say that they don’t believe in God. Another four percent are not too certain or don’t know if they believe in God. 83% of blacks answer that they are absolutely certain and another 11% answer that they are fairly certain that there is a God. By those statistics, blacks are today the most God-believing ethnic group in the United States (Pew Research Center 2015b).

mentioned before, for blacks it was not necessary to be deviant in terms of religion. Being black was reason enough to be murdered by racists.

28 For the additional challenges that female black atheists face, see Hribar (2013) and Fonza (2013).

29 In the PEW classification, blacks include only those who are not Latinos because the category of Latinos includes people of all races.
Warring Culture—The Religious Fight against Diversification

The conservative backlash that followed the liberal developments of the 1960s was tremendous, and the societal division it caused reverberates today. Religion always has a political component and, as I have shown, this made itself evident in American history from its very beginnings. Nevertheless, the religious impact on politics re-intensified in the 1970s and 80s, when Evangelical Christians started to engage in partisan politics in a concerted way. Shocked by liberal developments, including the outlawing of officially sanctioned school prayer, the congressional approval of the Equal Rights Amendment (which then failed ratification through the states), the legalization of abortion in the Supreme Court decision Roe v. Wade, the spread of what they called pornography, the Gay- and Lesbian Rights Movement, as well as the questioning of blind patriotism after the wars in Vietnam and Korea, many Evangelicals gave up their traditional disdain for politics and got actively involved in order to push back against the liberalization of society. The following fights between liberals and conservatives became known as the “Culture Wars,” a term popularized by James Davison Hunter. The author describes how during the second half of the 20th century religious groups overcame interreligious discord and united. But this growing interreligious tolerance did not mean that cultural conflict ended. Instead, it was fought along new lines. Those lines are not ecclesiastical or theological anymore, but result from “differing worldviews,” and evolve around the most fundamental questions of life (Hunter 1991:39–42). Conservative groups justified their cooperation beyond the boundaries of traditional religious demarcations by pointing to the threat they perceived from an increasingly secular society: Fundamentalist Tim LaHaye, author of the popular Left Behind-series, urged the cooperation of different religious groups, because “we have more in common with each other than we ever will with the secularizers of this country. It is time for all religiously committed citizens to unite against our common enemy.” (as cited in Hunter 1991:103) And the Evangelical activist Frank Schaeffer, who later moderated his views and now calls himself An atheist who believes in God (2014), recommend the unity of orthodox religious groups, because he saw

our backs are against the wall and we are facing an aggressively secularist society whose powerful elements are deliberately attempting to eradicate what little remains of orthodox religious influence in society. (as cited in Hunter 1991:103)
Fundamentalist Baptist preacher Jerry Falwell, the founder of the right-wing religious special interest group Moral Majority, became the key figure of the era. In response to the question of what the Moral Majority was, Falwell answered:

Moral Majority Inc., is made up of millions of Americans [...] who are deeply concerned about the moral decline of our nation, and who are sick and tired of the ways many amoral and secular humanists and other liberals are destroying the traditional family and the moral values on which our nation was built. (as cited in Snowball 1991:13)

Falwell pointed out that the group consisted not only of Christians but also of Jews and Mormons. The common enemy is identified in the secular humanists who he connects to immorality and who he believes are responsible for the destruction of the traditional family.30

The term “secular humanist” is used here as pejorative. However, as a self-description, it stands for a philosophical tradition, which strives for the “happiness of humans upon this earth and within the confines of Nature that is our home” (as cited in Rinaldo 2000:123). Humanism as it is used here means “a doctrine, attitude, or way of life centered on human interests or values,” and especially “a philosophy that usually rejects supernaturalism and stresses an individual’s dignity and worth and capacity for self-realization through reason” (Merriam-Webster s.a.ab). While certainly most humanists are secular or nonreligious, there are also people who identify as religious humanists. The term is used differently in regard to what the religious refers to. For some authors it marks a distinctly religious perspective (see e.g. Wolfe 1997). For others, it marks the idea that their humanism is held in a similar way as a religion (Rinaldo 2000:124). However, during the Culture Wars, the term was used to describe everything that differed from the religious norms of the imagined majority.

With Jimmy Carter, for the first time, an Evangelical was elected president. In 1978, he put up the first White House conference on families in order to reflect the urge to address family issues. But his recognition of “the pluralism of family life in America” (Carter 1978) was diametrical opposed to the view of conservatives, for whom a family consists of one man, one women and preferably multiple children. Disappointed because they found Carters politics too liberal, conservative

30 Of course, conservative positions also include a number of issues that have little to do with religion, and, of course, not all conservatives are religious. In fact, the number of atheist conservatives might be greatly underestimated, because conservative political settings make it especially difficult to come out.
Evangelicals shifted their focus from the personal religiosity of the leader to the set of principles that he stands for. This led them to support another candidate, who—although not exactly their role model in terms of lifestyle—promised to “make America great again” and attracted not only Republicans but also a significant number of people who traditionally voted for the Democrats: Ronald Reagan.

Referring to the Johnson-Amendment, which prohibits tax-sheltered churches from endorsing political candidates, Reagan famously assured an audience of 15,000 Evangelicals in Dallas: “I know you can’t endorse me. But I want you to know that I can endorse you, and what you are doing.” (as cited in Boerl and Donbavand 2015:39) Reagan alluded to Evangelical’s deepest fear—that of the secularization of America. In his Evil Empire Speech in 1983, he mourns the attitude of many who have turned to a modern-day secularism, discarding the tried and time-tested values upon which our very civilization is based. No matter how well intentioned, their value system is radically different from that of most Americans. And while they proclaim that they’re freeing us from superstitions of the past, they’ve taken upon themselves the job of superintending us by government rule and regulation. (Reagan 1983)

As examples for that immorality he mentions not only that some clinics offer abortions but also that some institutions try to prevent unwanted pregnancies by educating and handing out birth control drugs to under-aged girls without getting their parents’ consent. Even this he portrays as an assault to the “Judeo-Christian tradition.”

For him, this secular threat to the family goes hand in hand with the Soviet Union’s threat to America’s religious freedom. He even told his audience of a young father who would rather see his daughters die now, while they still believe in God, than see them grow up in communism, where they might one day die not believing in God anymore. The story resonated with the Evangelicals, who applauded enthusiastically. Life, apparently, is worthy only if it’s led by God—a stance which unmasks the “pro-life” position as one that is more concerned with conforming to religious norms than with the actual life of children.

According to Hunter (1991), the conflict between moral traditionalists and cultural conservatives on the one hand, and cultural progressives or liberals on the other, is one about hegemony,
public culture, and national identity—a struggle to define America. But as cultural theory is never purely neutral, Hunter not only describes those “wars” but also brings his own moral background to the field. His framing the conflict as symmetric is itself a rhetorical form that is part of the discussion. The more moderate among the conservatives describe the culture wars as a conflict in which the two sides are intolerant towards each other: While the conservatives want to keep their version of America, the liberals want to install a new one. On first sight that may seem symmetrical. But if we reflect on the question of how norms come into play here, the difference becomes clear. The term conservatism means, among other things, a “disposition in politics to preserve what is established,” a “political philosophy based on tradition and social stability” or “the tendency to prefer an existing or traditional situation to change” (Merriam-Webster s.a.i). In the American case, that means following the Christian or at least theist norms of conduct. The term liberal on the other hand means “marked by generosity” but also “lacking moral restraint,” licentious, loose, broad-minded, “not literal or strict,” and “not bound by authoritarianism, orthodoxy, or traditional forms” (Merriam-Webster s.a.o). With regard to religious norms, that means—and that is exactly what conservatives oppose—the absence of a strict model that is to be adhered to.

For Hunter the “libertarian impulse to permit any kind of sexual behavior so long as it is private and among consenting individuals” amounts to the end of all “collective life,” as it lacks some “standards defining what the community or nation will embrace and what it will eschew” (Hunter 1991:325). However, it is exactly those “standards” which impose a certain version of morality on people, while the lack of such standards does not. To pluralize what counts as a legitimate does not rule out the traditional family—it simply opposes the idea that there are forms that are ruled out.

This is best illustrated with the struggle about the legitimacy of homosexuality. Evangelicals, for example, stylized homosexuality as a major threat to the traditional family. In 1999, after the brutal murder of Billy Jack Gaither, a homosexual living in Alabama, an event was initiated by homosexual Evangelical Mel White in order to “discuss violence on both sides.” At this event, Jerry Falwell was asked if the heterosexual family is the only option. His response was

Without a question… . Marriage begins when a man and woman legally marry. No other diverse family form is mentioned in scripture and in western civilization. You’ll find in
every country, in every place, and in every major religion, the heterosexual husband-wife relationship is the exclusive family. (Falwell 2000)

The approval of same-sex marriage would lead to “a breakdown of the family and family values. […] Everything that America is built on—basically the Judeo-Christian ethic—will be down the tubes.” (Falwell 2000) Falwell portrays homosexuality and its acceptance as a threat to a certain set of values in America. Asked what gays can do, he recommends they become heterosexual. So, Falwell wants to rule out homosexuality on the basis of Biblical principles, while on the other hand no one wants to prevent heterosexuality as long as it is between consenting adults. While traditional norms rule out difference, the acceptance of difference does not rule out traditional lifestyles. This is why the assumption of symmetry in the culture wars already implies that difference is perceived as a threat.

**Doing God's Work—The Christian Anti-Abortion Terrorism**

Maybe the most defining matter in the culture wars is the subject of abortion. While homophobia certainly has led to violence and murder of homosexuals, the fight against abortion has brought forward a distinct branch of Christian terrorism. Like the Klan, there have been violent Christian terror-groups in the United States before. However, the Army of God has a close resemblance to a modern terrorist groups like Al-Qaida or ISIS in the sense that they are bound not necessarily through an hierarchical organization but at least partly exist in a structure of cells, bound together only through their radical ideology (Jefferis 2011:xi–xxi).

Methods of birth control and abortion have been used throughout history, and were an issue already for the early Christians. While the broader culture accepted abortion, the newly formed Christian establishment strongly condemned the practice and excommunicated women who knowingly aborted (Jefferis 2011:iii). The early United States, however, ruled mainly on the basis of the English Common Law, according to which abortion was accepted until the so-called quickening—the first movements of the fetus within the body of a women, which happens usually between the fourth and fifth month. Historically, quickening was the only way in which the existence of a fetus could be proven (Mohr 1978:85). The first time that a law which dealt with the practice of abortion was inserted into an American criminal codebook was in 1821 in Connecticut. Between the section about robbery and murder and the section about secretly delivering a “bastard child,” the lawmakers included a section that criminalized giving any
substances “with an intention him, her, or them, thereby to murder, or thereby to cause or procure the miscarriage of any woman, then being quick with child” (as cited in Mohr 1978:310). According to historian James C. Mohr, the focus of that law was the danger the women were subjected to by the procedure, as abortions with the help of substances were often deadly for them, too. It did not proscribe abortion per se, as other methods to abort were not affected, and neither did it punish the women who took the substances themselves. Similar laws were introduced in several other states, too (Mohr 1978:324). That shows that neither the idea of the quickening as the beginning of life nor abortion in general, were questioned during that time. When abortions became more visible and—maybe more important—when they were no longer sought only for pregnancies which were considered illegitimate but also by married, white, middle- and upper-class women from Protestant backgrounds, who either thought that they already had enough children or wanted to delay their childbirth, the laws became stricter (Mohr 1978:674, 1194).

Although the fight against abortion was led mainly by physicians, religious arguments have played a role from the very beginning. In 1844, the Boston Medical and Surgical Journal phrased it that way: “Law is disregarded, and those who have become both expert and bold in the profession of stifling human life in utero, neither fear the frowns of man nor the avenging arm of God.” (as cited in Mohr 1978:1683). And Wharton and Stille’s Medical Jurisprudence cited the 1854 lecture of the physician Hugh L. Hodge—brother of Charles Hodge, the theologian who so firmly condemned the assumption of evolution as atheism—on abortion, in length. “So low, gentlemen,” Hodge comments,

is the moral sense of the community on this subject, so ignorant are the greater number of individuals, that even mothers, in many instances, shrink not from the commission of this crime, but will voluntarily destroy their own progeny, in violation of every natural sentiment, and in opposition to the laws of God and man. […] These facts are horrible, but they are too frequent and too true. Often, very often, must all the eloquence and all the authority of the practitioner be employed; often he must, as it were, grasp the conscience of his weak and erring patient, and let her know, in language not to be misunderstood, that she is responsible to her Creator for the life of the being within her. (Hodge 1873 [1855]:71–73)
Here we can observe how Christian morals directly influenced the medical standards of the time and how religious ideology was inserted into what was seen as a law of nature: that a women’s purpose was to give birth. When women wanted to decide for themselves if they want to have children, they were depicted by the “gentlemen” as weak and misunderstanding of their religious duties. The language that is “not to be misunderstood” leaves a wide array for force, including physical violence. In the following decades, abortion was more and more depicted as a result of the Feminist Movement. Men (and sometimes women) accused women who sought abortions of selfishness and self-indulgences. According to Mohr, women who sought an abortion were described as interested only in themselves rather than in their supposedly God-given role as mothers (Mohr 1978:1505–1513).

The churches, too, officially endorsed the fight against abortion: John Bernard Fitzpatrick, the Bishop of Boston, had already in 1858 called abortion “a sin so directly opposite to the first laws of nature, and to the designs of God, our Creator.” And Martin John Spalding, Bishop of Baltimore, announced the Catholic position on abortion, which resulted from a council of bishops held there in 1869: Abortion is,

in the sight of God and His Church, as great a crime, as would be the killing of a child after birth. . . . No mother is allowed, under any circumstances, to permit the death of her unborn infant, not even for the sake of preserving her own life. (as cited in Mohr 1978:2577–2599)

Protestant churches, too, started to condemn abortion. The well-known Congregationalist Reverend John Todd, in 1867 called abortion “Fashionable Murder,” and other denominations followed with similar statements linking abortion to women’s unwillingness to be reduced to what was seen as their natural and religious determination (Mohr 1978:2588–2695).

Those religious ideas were translated into law through the “Comstock Laws.” Designed by Anthony Comstock and supported by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice and the Young Men’s Christian Association, they were enacted by Congress in 1873. The Comstock Act, along with proscribing the circulation of any “obscene” material, prohibited “any article or medicine for the prevention of conception, or for causing unlawful abortion” (United States Congress 1873). That the act did not even have to mention God or give any standard of what is
“obscene,” shows how deeply a nonsectarian but heavily Christian morality was shaping American society.

Between the 1860s and 1880s, many states included new or revised laws regarding abortion in their legislation, and by the beginning of the 20th century it was criminalized to interrupt the gestation at any point in the pregnancy (Mohr 1978:2780, 3156). Many of those laws prohibiting abortion remained in place until the Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade* 1973, in which a young pregnant woman with the help of a “pro-choice” group sued the State of Texas because she could not get a legal abortion there. The Supreme Court decided that

State criminal abortion laws […]], that except from criminality only a life-saving procedure on the mother’s behalf without regard to the stage of her pregnancy and other interests involved violate the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, which protects against state action the right to privacy, including a woman’s qualified right to terminate her pregnancy. Though the State cannot override that right, it has legitimate interests in protecting both the pregnant woman’s health and the potentiality of human life, each of which interests grows and reaches a ‘compelling’ point at various stages of the woman’s approach to term. (United States Supreme Court 1973)

The ruling allows states to outlaw the practice for the third trimester of the pregnancy, “except where necessary, in appropriate medical judgment, for the preservation of the life or health of the mother.” The majority opinion delivered by Supreme Court judge Harry A. Blackmun argued that there is no consensus in medicine, philosophy or theology that life begins at conception—as it was argued by the state of Texas—, and that therefore, the court cannot impose such a decision (United States Supreme Court 1973).

It was this court ruling that caused the biggest outcry from abortion-opponents. For them, life begins at conception and consequently abortion is murder. A movement to oppose it was formed quickly and on the first anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, 6,000 people protested the decision. The first organizers were Catholic mothers. The movement grew over the following years, and by 1980, the organizers estimated 10,000 protesters on the anniversary. The religious makeup of the movement amplified, and in the late 1970s fundamentalist and Evangelical Christians became involved (Jefferis 2011:10–14).
One of the proponents was Francis Schaeffer, Presbyterian author of the influential *Christian Manifesto*. Schaeffer determined that the abortion issue was just one part of a broad range of issues, which need to be fought by the Christian community in the country. He criticized what he saw as over-permissiveness, the breakdown of the family, infanticide, pornography, euthanasia of old and disabled people, the problem with the public schools, punk rock, and so on. But, for him, the “deeper problem”—the underlying reason for this breakdown—is a Humanist conspiracy:

> Abortion itself would be worth spending much of our lifetimes to fight against, because it is the killing of human life, but it’s only a symptom of the total. What we are facing is Humanism: Man, the measure of all things—viewing final reality being only material or energy shaped by chance—therefore, human life having no intrinsic value—therefore, the keeping of any individual life or any groups of human life, being purely an arbitrary choice by society at the given moment. (Schaeffer 1982)

He argued that “The intrinsic value of the human life is founded upon the Judeo-Christian concept that man is unique because he is made in the image of God […]. Take it away, and I just say gently, the stopper is out of the bathtub for all human life.” He then depicts humanism as tyranny, as a totalitarian regime that is no different from the regimes of Stalin, Mao, or Hitler, who also “killed for what they conceived to be the good of society.” If one does not accept the doctrine that personhood starts with conception, this “opens the door to the arbitrary taking of *any* human life”—a warning that he issued specifically to the few blacks and other minorities in the audience. His vision was the restoration of a Christian set of laws:

> We must absolutely set out to smash the lie of the new and novel concept of the separation of religion from the state which most people now hold and which Christians have just bought a bill of goods. (Schaeffer 1982, emphasis in original)

Although he assured his listeners that he did not want a theocracy until Christ comes back to the earth, he encouraged them to put their religious motives above the law of the state:

> When the government negates the law of God, it abrogates its authority. God has given certain offices to restrain chaos in this fallen world, but it does not mean that these offices are autonomous, and when a government commands that which is contrary to the
Law of God, it abrogates its authority. [...] at a certain point, it is not only the privilege but it is the duty of the Christian to disobey the government. (Schaeffer 1982)

It was this spirit of righteousness, which encouraged much of the non-violent as well as violent opposition against abortion. One of the first organizations was Operation Rescue. Its founder, Randall Terry, compared abortion to the Holocaust and fostered civil disobedience in the style of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. His organization started protests in the form of demonstrations and blocking the entrances of abortion clinics (Jefferis 2011:14–16).

However, there were people for whom nonviolent protest was not enough. Already in the 1970s, there were violent actions against clinics, including vandalism, arson and bombing. In 1982, two men who claimed to belong to the Army of God kidnapped the abortion provider Hector Zevallos and his wife Rosalee Jean. One of the kidnappers, Don Benny Anderson, claimed to receive his orders directly from God and from the Archangel Michael (Jefferis 2011:16–24). In their motivation letter, they stated that those who love God would “kill the baby killers” (as cited in Jefferis 2011:24). That was the beginning of a terrorist wave conducted by people who felt that this was their Godly calling. The 1980s saw hundreds of abortion clinic bombings, arson attacks, and assaults against people who seek or provide abortions, as well as threats toward Supreme Court judge Blackmun (Jefferis 2011:23–28).

In the 1990s, the Army of God’s tactics amplified to violent attacks and murder. In 1992, an epilogue was added to the Manual of the organization: An how-to for the fight against

a system which claims to be ‘... one Nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all,’—but which in actuality is a nation under the power of Evil—Satan, who prowls about the world seeking the ruin of the souls of mankind... . A nation ruled by a godless civil authority that is dominated by humanism, moral nihilism, and new-age perversion of the high standards upon which a Godly society must be founded, if it is to endure. (Army of God 1992)

The 1992 addition explicitly incites the murder of abortion providers:

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31 The version of this Manual cited here can be found in the internet. However, as the author of the original document is unknown and the actual document is open for changes, the quotations might not be exact. The manual was last derived March 10th, 2017. See also Jefferis (2011).
Beginning officially with the passage of the Freedom of Choice Act—we, the remnant of God-fearing men and women of the United States of Amerika (sic!), do officially declare war on the entire child-killing industry. After praying, fasting, and making continual supplication to God for your pagan, heathen, infidel souls, we then peacefully, passively presented our bodies in front of your death camps, begging you to stop the mass murder of infants. Yet you hardened your already blackened, jaded hearts. We quietly accepted the resulting imprisonment and suffering of our passive-resistance. Yet you mocked God and continued the holocaust. No longer! All of the options have expired. Our Most Dread Sovereign Lord God requires that whosoever sheds man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed. Not out of hatred for you, but out of love for the persons you exterminate, we are forced to take arms against you. Our life for yours—a simple equation. Dreadful. Sad. Reality, nonetheless. You shall not be tortured at our hands. Vengeance belongs to God only. However, execution is rarely gentle. (Army of God 1992)

Political scientist Jennifer Jefferis lists ten people that were killed by the Army of God in abortion related crimes. Hundreds were wounded (Jefferis 2011:21–51).

A member of the group, Eric Rudolph, was also convicted of bombing a gay nightclub in Atlanta. Army of God members even celebrated the execution of homosexuals in Saudi Arabia (Jefferis 2011:37–41). It is this last aspect in particular that shows how hollow their argument for “life” actually is. Instead of defending innocent life, as they claim, the Army of God tries to impose their personal religious views upon the whole of society. In 2009, the mother of an activist, who had driven his car into the entrance of an abortion clinic, defended his actions by saying he “was only doing the Lord’s work” (as cited in Jefferis 2011:43). However, anti-abortion terrorism neither was nor would be the only form of religious terrorism in the United States.

A Raid against the Unbelievers—The Terror Attacks of 9/11

On September 11, 2001, Islamic fundamentalists attacked the United States and killed nearly 3000 people. The attacks are often interpreted as political violence that is part of a larger fight against the global dominance of the United States. Although it is well-known that the attackers were Islamic fundamentalists, the religious dimension of their acts has been addressed only reluctantly by American officials and public. The FBI report on the events did not indicate the religious nature of their motives. It reconstructs, for example, the night before the men went on
the planes as if they pursued only “ordinary activities: making ATM withdrawals, eating pizza, and shopping at a convenience store” (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States s.a., see also Kippenberg 2005:56–57).

But according to the religion scholar Hans Kippenberg, the documents found in the belongings of three of the attackers prescribed precisely how to behave before and during the attacks. As a spiritual manual, those documents give important insights into the mindset of the terrorists. The document states clearly that the attackers were to consider it “a raid on the path (of God)” (as cited in Kippenberg 2006:15). Most of the four pages—in fact over 90%—deal directly with religious instruction. The scholar of Arabic Tilman Seidensticker pointed out that, contrary to the conjecture that much of Islamic terrorism is grounded in the plight of Muslims in the world, there are no attempts to justify the acts in those terms (Kippenberg and Seidensticker 2006:19–22). While including such details as reminding the terrorists to wear socks and to tighten their shoes properly, the manual primarily prescribes prayers and recitations of the Koran. It promises the pleasures of paradise and the virgins that wait for the martyrs. Furthermore, the texts state clearly that violence against unbelievers is legitimate only if it is “for the sake of God.” This is illustrated in the manual with the following story of Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of Mohammed:

When he once fought against an unbeliever, the unbeliever spat on him. Ali then let his sword pause and did not strike him. Only afterwards did he strike him. After the battle, one of the companions asked him why he had done so, why he had not struck the unbeliever, and first left off and only later struck him. Ali answered, “When he spat on me, I feared I would strike him out of vengeance. Therefore I held my sword”, or how he said. When he had called the intention to mind, he turned to him and struck and killed him. All this means that the human being should prepare his soul in a very short time, and then all he does is for the sake of God. (as cited in Kippenberg and Seidensticker 2006:16–17)

If we assume that these documents played a role for the terrorists, the attacks were directed against a group that they considered to be nonbelievers. The Arabic term used here for the nonbeliever is “Kafir.” Kafir originally means “obliterating, covering” or “concealing benefits received,” which amounts to “ungrateful.” In the Koran, the term is used with reference to Allah, which gives it the meaning of “concealing God’s blessings” or “ungrateful to God.” From there
the meaning of the term developed into “infidel.” Attitudes towards infidels developed over time: While in the early period in Mecca waiting seemed appropriate, the Koranic recommendations evolved to keeping a distance, to self-defense, and ultimately to taking offensive measures against infidels (Björkman 1997).

Despite or maybe even because of the inherent religious quality of the attacks, the reactions in the United States have been dominated by religion, too. For many people the immediate response was to gather in places of worship and to pray. However, this reaction was not limited to private persons and clergy. State officials also employed highly religious language and symbolism. This way, national identity was—again—tied to the practice and display of religion. In his address to the nation, President George W. Bush asked for “prayers for all those who grieve, for the children whose worlds have been shattered, for all whose sense of safety and security has been threatened.” And he went on to say that he prayed that “they will be comforted by a power greater than any of us” (Bush 2001a). For those, who happen not to believe in such a greater power, this, of course, is of little comfort, and did nothing to reestablish their sense of security. Moreover, there was an explicitly expressed public expectation of religious responses. Two days after the attacks President Bush, citing “scripture”—as there was only the Bible—and evoking “one Nation under God” (Bush 2001c), proclaimed a National Day of Prayer and Remembrance in order to honor the memory of the victims. At the Prayer Day-Service, Bush then declared the attacks and the loss that people suffered were part of God’s plan: “God’s signs are not always the ones we look for. We learn in tragedy that his purposes are not always our own.” At the event he even went on to say, “This world He created is of moral design.” (Bush 2001b) While this might be comforting to some believers, for those who don’t believe in God, it must have been offensive to try to find some purpose and moral design in those atrocities.

Others discovered their “sign” when a structure resembling a cross was found on the site of Ground Zero. The column and crossbeam stemming from the girder of the buildings were put on a platform and blessed by the Franciscan priest Brian Jordan, who also held religious services there. Persons of various faiths or of no faith were welcome and offered communion at these services. When The Cross was included in the public museum underneath the memorial, the group American Atheists sued, because they felt it would violate the Establishment Clause. They demanded either that The Cross not be displayed or that, for example, a plaque be displayed
which acknowledged atheists were among the victims and rescuers. The courts, however, could not find such a violation because

the stated purpose of displaying The Cross at Ground Zero to tell the story of how some people used faith to cope with the tragedy is genuine, and an objective observer would understand the purpose of the display to be secular; b. an objective observer would not view the display as endorsing religion generally, or Christianity specifically, because it is part of an exhibit entitled ‘Finding Meaning at Ground Zero’; the exhibit includes various nonreligious as well as religious artifacts that people at Ground Zero used for solace; and the textual displays accompanying the cross communicate its historical significance within this larger context; and c. there is no evidence that the static display of this genuine historic artifact excessively entangles the government with religion. (United States Court of Appeals, Second Circuit 2014)

This decision stands for the challenge that atheists face in terms of their public recognition. The nonreligious items that were mentioned in the case were, for example, the American flag or mementos that were cut out by ironworkers, like the Twin Towers or the Manhattan skyline. However, while these symbols do not have a particular religious meaning to them, they also do not indicate that the victims were not religious, or did not turn to religion while grieving. Displaying a cross together with the American flag does not make any reference to atheists and neither to people of other religious faiths. But while the latter could be included through the display of other religious symbols, representing something that is defined through the absence of religion creates a challenge—a challenge the court took advantage of here. Nevertheless, given the omnipresence of religious and specifically Christian references during public and state ceremonies, this seems like a sideshow.

In her study about the discrimination of atheists, legal scholar Nina Weiler-Harwell points out that the constant evocation of God during the commemorations shows the de-facto establishment of religion in the United States. The use of religious language in national events has often been called “ceremonial deism” in American legal arguments. Although ceremonial deism obviously creates a tension to the Establishment Clause, it has been declared constitutional by the Supreme Court because it is considered non-sectarian and has a long tradition in the United States (Weiler-Harwell 2011:4–7). But ceremonial deism excludes atheists: During the religious awakening after September 11, atheists were conspicuously absent from the public mourning
process, as if they did not belong to the nation. Or, as an atheist from a Chicago suburb put it: “I’m feeling excluded from this. There’s this big unity, but it’s all under God… I feel as strongly about this as everyone else.” Another felt that atheists “were being lumped in there with terrorists” because Americans confuse morality with religion (as cited in Weiler-Harwell 2011:8). According to the *Washington Times*, many public institutions bypassed the legal guidelines and prayed “openly at assemblies, in classrooms and at sporting events, asking God for support and protection” (as cited in Gresock 2001:578).

As it was not enough that atheists were excluded from the public ceremonies, some religious leaders even made them responsible for the attacks. Jerry Falwell blamed the attacks on pagans, secularists, and everyone who violated conservative religious norms:

Throwing God out successfully with the help of the federal court system, throwing God out of the public square, out of the schools. The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say: ‘You helped this happen.’ (as cited in Lincoln 2006:519–529)

This accusation originates in the old idea that the American people are bound by God’s will collectively, in order to keep the covenant with God and America safe. Everyone who violates religious norms is thus seen as responsible for God’s anger and, therefore, His punishment. So, in the aftermath of 9/11, atheists served as scapegoats even for religious violence.

In his address at the *National Day of Prayer*, Bush asked God not only for comfort but also for guidance (Bush 2001b). And this religious guidance soon played a role in Operation *Enduring Freedom*, a mission that many criticized for its apocalyptic undertones (see e.g. Lincoln 2006:455–481). When he announced strikes against Al Qaida and the Taliban in Afghanistan on October 7, Bush said, “A Commander in Chief sends America’s sons and daughters into a battle in a foreign land only after the greatest care and a lot of prayer” (Bush 2001d)—thereby indicating that he had made the decisions about the military action based on his religious beliefs.
Bush was careful not to condemn Muslims in general:

The United States of America is a friend to the Afghan people, and we are the friends of almost a billion worldwide who practice the Islamic faith. The United States of America is an enemy of those who aid terrorists and of the barbaric criminals who profane a great religion by committing murder in its name. (Bush 2001d)

So, in keeping with the denial of the religious dimension of terrorism, he calls terrorism a profanation of a great religion, again blaming nonconformism to religious rules instead of religious rules themselves, or those who take them literally.

Historian Bruce Lincoln describes how Bush’s speech skillfully avoided giving the impression that this was a religious conflict because the strategy of the United States relies on the cooperation of Muslim countries. But on the other hand, he satisfied the demands of the religious right by subtly double coding it with apocalyptic allusions and references to the United States’ role in world history (Lincoln 2006:475). For example, Bush closed his speech with “May God continue to bless America.” This goes beyond the conventional formula of “God bless America,” and reaffirms that the country has enjoyed and, what’s more, deserved God’s favor throughout history—something that will continue if it remains strong in its faith. Although those words may sound like a meaningless formula that is common at the end of such a speech, the subtle difference in the usual wording made the weight of the subtext clear (Lincoln 2006:444–455).

In his address, Bush invoked a Manichean worldview in which

Every nation has a choice to make. In this conflict, there is no neutral ground. If any government sponsors the outlaws and killers of innocents, they have become outlaws and murderers, themselves. And they will take that lonely path at their own peril. (Bush 2001d)
But this Manichean worldview was even topped by Al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden’s response\(^32\): Bin Laden endorsed terrorism in order to “destroy America.” He gave his “Grace and gratitude to God” for the attacks on September 11, and called the terrorists “the forefront of Islam.” Bin Laden identifies “America, and its allies” as the “the modern world’s symbol of paganism” and denounces all those in the Muslim world who do not oppose the United States in the various conflicts in the Middle East as “hereditary,” “hypocrites,” and “apostates.” America, he says, has “turned even the countries that believe in Islam against us.” (Bin Laden 2006)

For him, the world is divided “into two camps, the camp of the faithful and the camp of infidels.” Bin Laden knows that many in the Islamic World reject terrorism and side, if not with America, at least against a radical interpretation of Islam. In order to polarize, he accuses those who do not share his intentions of being “infidels” and “apostates.” Knowing that the terrorists in their radicalism hold a minority position, he goes beyond *us* versus *them* and directly addresses those in between in order to draw them in to a religious opposition against America: “May God shield us and you from them.” (Bin Laden 2006)

Lincoln has observed similarities in the speeches of Bush and Bin Laden, but I think one important point has to be added: Also Bin Laden did not think of the conflict as one between Islam and America. He emphasized the conflict between those who fight against America and those who don’t, thereby also targeting liberal Muslims and secularists from Islamic backgrounds.

But although 9/11 was an outburst of religious violence directed against those who the terrorists considered nonbelievers, those who are actual nonbelievers stayed largely excluded from the public memorial ceremonies, and were even blamed by some for the violence. During 9/11 and its aftermath, atheists were attacked from two directions: from Islamic fundamentalists and their fellow Americans.

**The End of Tolerance—The Rise of New Atheism**

Since the early years of the new millennium, we have see the rise of a new, more outspoken and more audacious era of atheism. In reference to the Book of Revelation, the most popular

\(^{32}\) According to Bruce Lincoln (2006:289), Bin Laden’s address was actually prerecorded which means that he must have anticipated Bush’s speech. As his address answers relatively closely to Bush, this would show how predictable Bush and the American political climate have been.
representatives of this “New Atheism”—Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens—are often called the “four horsemen.” According to Dawkins, however, they had also invited a “horsewoman” to the table: The Somali-born writer, film-maker and well-known critic of Islam, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who unfortunately could not come to the meeting which was later published under this catchy title (Dawkins et al. 2012).

There is substantive debate around the question of how New Atheism is defined, and particularly what—if anything—is new about it. Political scientist Steven Kettell describes as its key features the naturalist worldview and the emphasis on rationality, reason, and science. New Atheists understand religious doctrines as making truth claims and therefore as subject to scientific inquiry, and rejection where no evidence is found that supports them. Furthermore, New Atheists see religion as dangerous because it can create tribal mentalities, prejudice, discrimination and even violence. Hence, New Atheists also criticize moderate forms of religion (Kettell 2016:2).

Of course, atheism did not start anew in the new millennium. Atheism itself has always existed; and as I have shown in the beginning of the chapter, there probably have always been atheists in the United States. The organization American Atheists was founded in 1963. Secularist or Freethinkers organizations with a broader outlook have existed even longer: The American Humanist Association was founded in 1941; Americans United for Separation of Church and State was founded in 1947. The American Association for the Advancement of Atheism was founded in 1925; and the “Godless Girl,” child philosopher, editor and political activist Queen Silver, founded the Atheist Junior League in 1927. The American Ethical Union even goes back to 1876.

Here it is important to know that the label “New Atheists” has been given to them by a critic, the journalist Gary Wolf, who—although not religious himself—finds that they are too extreme in their positions and behave like prophets who engage in evangelism (Wolf 2006). The label was used as a self-description only later, similar to the positive appropriation of the terms “gay” or “queer” by homosexuals (Kettell 2016:3). Nevertheless, the New Atheists are often described as genuinely new, for example, because of their political activism, their attempts to form groups and a sense of community, or for their combination of such conflicting elements as Enlightenment-principles with postmodern concerns (McAnulla 2012:87; Kettell 2016:3). But aside from these, I find to be their strongest difference from the established atheists in the United States (and
certainly their most controversial feature) their intolerance for religion. As Wolf—the journalist who named them—has pointed out, they in fact, “condemn not just belief in God but respect for belief in God” (Wolf 2006).

According to Susan Jacoby, the Freethought Movement as an intellectual force which was critical of and outspoken about religion in general died out in the 1920s. Afterwards, the critique focused mainly on concrete issues like birth control, science, public schools, civil rights, and the fight against capital punishment. But generalized opposition against religion was not on the agenda anymore (Jacoby 2005:263). So, with the exception of Madalyn Murray O’Hair and some of her allies, during most of the 20th century atheism in the United States existed either as an imaginary threat associated with fascism and communism, or as a small and relatively quiet voice. The “old” atheists tried to find their place in a highly religious nation. The New Atheists try to change the extent of that religiosity.

What triggered this development is relatively obvious: Sam Harris says of himself that he started to write *The End of Faith*—the first bestselling New Atheist book—on September 12th in 2001. It begins with the story of an Islamist suicide bomber. Harris describes not just the threat that he feels through the combination of ancient creeds and modern weapons, which could destroy the world (Harris 2006:11–14). He also cites the Koran and its various parts that incite violence against unbelievers (2006:32-34, 117-123), as well as statistics that show how many people in the Muslim world find suicide bombings “justified to defend Islam” (Harris 2006:124–128). For him, the question is not if there can be moderate versions of faith. For him, moderation happens only if people abandon their faith and ignore the basic incitement entailed in their holy scriptures: “Religious moderation is the product of secular knowledge and scriptural ignorance.” (Harris 2006:21) Where this kind of secularization has not happened—for example, in many Islamic societies—religion continues to be a threat to the world (Harris 2006:29–36).

With the exception of Hirsi Ali, the New Atheists do not confine their critique to Islam. Hirsi Ali focusses particularly on Islam, which was her own former religion and from which she now feels threatened because of her critique, particular since the director of her film *Submission*, Theo van Gogh, was murdered by an Islamist, who left a note on his body in which he also threatened Hirsi Ali. She addresses the West’s double standard in the critique of religion:
We criticize the Catholic Church for its treatment of women, for its sheltering of pedophiles, and for other harms it has caused. And we do this for the purpose of improving people’s lives. But we’re not doing this for the Muslim community. (as cited in Harris 2014)

She also explicitly criticizes these double standards as “racism.” (Hirsi Ali 2006:xviii)

The other New Atheists address various forms of religious violence and intrusion in people’s private lives. They frequently criticize the increased influence of the Christian right in the United States, together with the homophobia it spreads and the violence against abortion clinics which it encourages (for example Dawkins 2008:326–336). They also focus on all kinds of religious indoctrination of children (see Dawkins 2008:349–387). Harris includes the Inquisition, and the Christian roots of anti-Semitism that led to the Holocaust (see Harris 2006:80–107). And Christopher Hitchens criticizes, for example, the religious conflicts in Ireland, and that Mother Teresa has spoken out against allowing couples to get divorced (see Hitchens 2008:19–20). Dawkins (2007) and Dennett (2007) in particular devote a great deal of their work to pointing out the religious hurdles against science—Dawkins predominantly to the obstacles that prevent potentially life-saving scientific research, Dennett primarily to those against a scientific study of religion itself.

The tenor of these arguments is that religion is not just a harmless way of life that deserves to be respected. Religion claims absolute truth, and if it has the power it will be dangerous to everyone who does not adhere to it. Therefore, New Atheists call into question the classical notions of tolerance and coexistence. Hitchens, recounting the story of the Indian-American and Ex-Muslim novelist Salman Rushdie, and Iran’s religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini, who issued a fatwa demanding Rushdie’s death, believes that it is impossible for the secular and the religious to simply cohabit:

The true believer cannot rest until the whole world bows the knee. Is it not obvious to all, say the pious, that religious authority is paramount, and that those who decline to recognize it have forfeit their right to exist? (Hitchens 2008:36)

And for Harris, “belief is not a private matter” because: “as a man believes, so he will act” and “certain beliefs are intrinsically dangerous” (2006:44).
This is highly controversial and alienates many—not just believers but also atheists. It is hard to tell how this irreconcilability has impacted the way atheists are seen in the United States. The front row actors of New Atheism certainly received death threats and all kinds of other forms of hateful responses. The number of books in which New Atheism is discussed or fought against is hard to come by. An online search with Amazon on the topic in 2017 led to over 600 results.

Critics range from fellow atheists to religious fundamentalists: Perhaps the most important internal critique stems from feminists. Some serious problems with patriarchal structures within the atheist community have played out long before the #MeToo-Movement in the so-called “Elevatorgate.” Rebecca Watson, an atheist blogger, criticized a man, who approached her in an elevator at an atheist conference at four o’clock in the morning, inviting her for coffee in his room. The hateful reactions that followed her critique illustrated the exact same sexism which she had pointed out earlier onstage at the very same conference. Dawkins accused her of overblowing the incident by comparing her plight with that of women in Islam.33 She even received hate mail, in which men wished her to be raped (Watson 2011; Rennie 2011).

However, most critics—not surprisingly—focus on the way New Atheists approach religion. Aside from a number of religious critics who defend the idea of God, New Atheists are frequently called out for their excessive rhetoric and their radical and at times homogenizing arguments, particularly concerning Islam. Some critics argue that New Atheists fight against versions of religion that they themselves have constructed by focusing on fundamentalism and presenting that as the essential features of the respective religions. Others argue that New Atheists dismiss the societal role of religion by reducing it to its metaphysical claims. Some criticize New Atheists’ lack of scholarly knowledge of religion, particular in terms of the varying modes of scriptural interpretation. Many critiques are aimed at the assumption that a less religious society will be a more liberal alternative, often by associating atheism with the crimes in communist or even Nazi-regimes. Furthermore, some argue that the belief in technology and science might be equally dangerous (for an overview McAnulla 2012:89–90). While many of these points might be true in some way or another, British political theorist Stuart McAnulla has observed a very interesting thing about those responses: the critics typically do not respond.

33 Dawkins apologized for writing that three years later, while actually repeating his point, that there are major and less grave forms of sexual assault Dawkins (2014). However, Watson, to my knowledge, has never compared the incidents in the elevator to the sexism in Islam, which was implied by Dawkins.
directly to the political concerns of the New Atheists—the ones that actually lay at the center of their whole activism. They seem to believe if they can show that New Atheists fail in their assessment of religion’s role in society, this will undermine all their specific arguments on political and practical issues (McAnulla 2012:90). Many critics ignore the basic arguments of the New Atheists while discussing extensively the way they make them. Here, one could again cite Wolf, who gave them their name, and who dislikes their “extremism in opposition to extremism” (Wolf 2006). So, the debate nicely demonstrates the different measures to which religion and atheism are held. While anti-atheism belongs to religion since time immemorial, the reverse—for atheists to be against religion—is still seen as an offense.

The New Atheists have made substantial efforts in convincing people of atheism. But more so, they have made efforts to get people who are already atheists out of the closet. Atheism is easy to hide. That allows people who do not believe to keep quiet about their convictions or lack thereof in order to avoid trouble. But with the political impact of religion the desire for a counterbalance rose. One of the responses to that was the OUT Campaign in 2006 by evolutionary psychologist Elisabeth Cornwell and Richard Dawkins. The campaign description shows what kind of concerns atheists in the United States have until today:

The OUT Campaign allows individuals to let others know they are not alone. It can also be a nice way of opening a conversation and help to demolish the negative stereotypes of atheists. Let the world know that we are not about to go away and that we are not going to allow those that would condemn us to push us into the shadows. [...] As more and more people join the OUT Campaign, fewer and fewer people will feel intimidated by religion. We can help others understand that atheists come in all shapes, sizes, colours and personalities. [...] It is time to let our voices be heard regarding the intrusion of religion in our schools and politics. Atheists along with millions of others are tired of being bullied by those who would force their own religious agenda down the throats of our children and our respective governments. (Out Campaign (Official) s.a.)

They also invented new labels like “Brights” and “Atheism+” which serve as self-descriptions rather than descriptions from religious people that mark them as nonconformists. They define a bright as “a person whose worldview is naturalistic (no supernatural and mystical elements)” and as
opposed to a super—which stands for “a person whose worldview includes supernatural and/or mystical elements”\textsuperscript{34} (The Brights’ Net s.a., emphasis in original).

And even their problem with sexism spurred some important changes in the atheist community, when atheist blogger Jen McCreight at her blog blaghag called “for a new wave of atheism,”

a wave that isn’t just a bunch of ‘middle-class, white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied men’ patting themselves on the back for debunking homeopathy for the 983258th time or thinking up yet another great zinger to use against Young Earth Creationists. It’s time for a wave that cares about how religion affects everyone and that applies skepticism to everything, including social issues like sexism, racism, politics, poverty, and crime. We can criticize religion and irrational thinking just as unabashedly and just as publicly, but we need to stop exempting ourselves from that criticism. (McCreight 2012a, emphasis in original)

McCreight got lots of positive feedback and people even designed logos for the new term.\textsuperscript{35} “Atheism+” is defined by McCreight as atheists who “care about social justice, […] support women’s rights, […] protest racism, […] fight homophobia and transphobia, […] and use critical thinking and skepticism” (McCreight 2012b). Apparently, despite the many intersections between the hatred against atheists and other forms of discrimination, it took the New Atheist Movement many years to become more aware about its overlap with those other fights. It remains to be seen if this will extend to the broader community of New Atheists.

Civilizing Religion—Thanks, Obama!

New Atheism in general and the respective labels in particular represent only a small portion of the nonreligious in the United States. The trend to leave organized religion or religion altogether is a larger one. After a long period in which the nonreligious have been a neglected category (Vernon 1968), scholars have observed an increase in people who report no religious affiliation in

\textsuperscript{34} A Bright with a capital B is defined by the Bright’s Net as “a bright who has registered at [their] website in support of the egalitarian civic vision of the Brights Movement.” The Brights’ Net (s.a.)

\textsuperscript{35} A logo consisting of an A for atheism and a cross or plus sign has been used already by the Non-Believers Giving Aid-initiative by the Richard Dawkins Foundation, which is a nonreligious disaster relief organization that raises money and donates to the International Red Cross and Doctors without Borders.
surveys since the late 1960s. The so called “Nones,” namely people who do not report a religious affiliation when asked by pollsters, rose steadily since then. While data from GSS shows that through the 1980s between 5% and 8% of Americans were not affiliated with any particular religion, those numbers have risen to 16% in 2006. Not all of the religiously unaffiliated are atheists. In fact, in 2006 still only 4% of the respondents identified as atheists or agnostics (Pew Research Center 2008:Chapt. 1). However, in 2016, the percentage of atheists and agnostics has risen to over seven per cent and the number of unaffiliated to 26%, with 13% of them identifying as atheist and 14% of those 26% defining themselves as agnostic (Jones et al. 2016). And as a growing share of the population, the nonreligious also demand political representation.

The American relationship between politics and religion is often described as civil religion. The concept of civil religion stems from Robert Bellah, who took the term from Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* and gave it a specifically American interpretation. He states:

> While some have argued that Christianity is the national faith, and others that church and synagogue celebrate only the generalized religion of ‘the American Way of Life,’ few have realized that there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America. (Bellah 2005 [1967]:40)

As he stressed that this religious dimension has the same seriousness as other religions and requires equal care in understanding, he analyzed the way and the place in which religion is used in American politics, particularly in the Inaugural speeches of American presidents. That many have used the concept of God in an almost ritualistic fashion and without a concrete reference towards the Christian God or Jesus Christ, for him does not mean that such a ritualistic usage can be easily dismissed. For him, this rather means that although political sovereignty rests with the people,

> implicitly, and often explicitly, the ultimate sovereignty has been attributed to God. […] Though the will of the people as expressed in the majority vote is carefully institutionalized as the operative source of political authority, it is deprived of an ultimate significance. The will of the people is not itself the criterion of right and wrong. There is a higher criterion in terms of which this will can be judged; it is possible that the people
may be wrong. The president’s obligation extends to the higher criterion. (Bellah 2005 [1967]:42–43)

Bellah’s civil religion is as much a legitimation of the public use of religious symbolism as a description of America’s political sphere (see also Bellah 1994). One can observe this ritualistic and symbolic reference to God in the presidential Inaugural speeches from George Washington on, who wrote in his first Inaugural Address, that in 1789:

It would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official act my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe, who presides in the councils of nations, and whose providential aids can supply every defect, that His benediction may consecrate to the liberties and happiness of the people of the United States a Government instituted by themselves for these essential purposes, and may enable every instrument employed in its administration to execute with success the functions allotted to his charge. No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of man more than those of the United States. Every step by which we have advanced to the character of an independent nation seems to have been distinguished by some token providential agency. (as cited in Bellah (2005 [1967]:43–44)

That means that an explicit religious requirement for presidents and with it for public office in general, has been formulated since the very beginning of the presidency. While the people have instituted the government “themselves,” the “Almighty Being” has consecrated and enabled it. He is the “Invisible Hand” and the United States as a people owes him acknowledgement. By saying that he not just rules the universe but also “presides the councils of nations,” this obligation is extended beyond an abstract one that can be adhered to through a mere formality into the concrete installation of government. By using the wording that it would be “improper” to leave God out of this first official presidential act, Washington shaped what political engagement without the acknowledgment of a deity would be, until today.

Even Bellah pointed out the challenge that civil religion poses to atheists:

We have had a Catholic President; it is conceivable that we could have a Jewish one. But could we have an agnostic president? Could a man with conscientious scruples about
using the word ‘God’ the way Kennedy and Johnson have used it be elected chief magistrate of our country? (Bellah 2005 [1967]:52)

During most of America’s history, atheists seemed to be the one minority that a politician could discriminate against without fearing repercussion or even with political gain. George Bush, Sr., for example, is quoted to have said during his presidential campaign “No, I don’t know that Atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God.” (as cited in National Secular Society 2004) 36 This sums up the position atheists were historically allotted to in American politics: They were actively excluded from citizenship. Without any further explication, it was understood that they do not belong to the Christian nation. Therefore, patriotism and atheism were seen as mutually exclusive.

For a number of years, atheists have also tried to make themselves heard as voters, for example, by wearing T-shirts that state, “I am an atheist and I vote.” Yet, they are barely addressed as a group to reach out to. Atheists are difficult to embrace for the Democratic Party because supporting them might alienate the overwhelming majority of religious people in the United States (Klug 2016). And conversely, the founding of atheist parties like The National Atheist Party or The Secular Party of America is unpromising given the small numbers of atheists, and the concern that any success of third-parties might endanger the victory of one’s preferred established party.

It was not until Barack Obama that a president also acknowledged nonbelievers in his Inaugural Address: “We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus and nonbelievers.” (Obama 2009) And not surprisingly nonbelievers celebrated him for that. However, if one analyzes his speeches in-depth, it becomes apparent how strongly his remarks were tempered by the otherwise fundamentally Christian rhetoric he was using.

Obama appeared on the national level for the first time with a notable speech at the Democratic Convention in 2004, in which he already exhibited his strategy of uniting the United States in religious terms. While acknowledging that John Kerry—who was nominated as the Democratic

36 There is no audio- or video recording of his answer and neither an official transcript. However, the incident was followed by a longer dispute between the Bush-administration and different secular groups in which Bush had plenty of opportunity to renounce the statement if he felt he was quoted wrongly, but didn’t National Secular Society (2004).
presidential candidate at this convention—would never “use faith as a wedge to divide us,” he himself pursued the strategy of uniting Democrats and Republicans by appealing to them on the basis of faith. In doing so, he attempted both to show commonality and to respond to the alleged Republican accusation that Democratic states were less religious. But rather than defending the right not to believe, he stated that, “We worship an awesome God in the Blue States” (Obama 2004) and in doing so implied—against the secular faction in the Democratic Party—that all those states were religious. Furthermore, he described equality and hope as God’s gifts to mankind, which suggested that they depend on a relationship to God.

Obama laid out this plan in full in a speech in 2006 where he addressed the relationship between religion and politics in the United States. After he talked about his experience in the 2004 campaign for Senator of Illinois where his opponent Alan Keyes has said that “Christ would not vote for Barack Obama because Barack Obama has behaved in a way that it is inconceivable for Christ to have behaved,” he criticized conservatives for exploiting the gap in party affiliation between churchgoers and those who don’t go to church. But he also criticized the Democrats for responding by essentially avoiding the topic of religion altogether—something he saw as a strategic mistake. He acknowledged, that “Americans are religious people” and urged progressives to approach them: “If we don’t reach out to evangelical Christians and other religious Americans and tell them what we stand for, then the Jerry Falwells and Pat Robertson and Alan Keyeses will continue to hold sway.” (Obama 2007b) He saw within this constituency a potential group of voters who were discontent with Republicans economic policies based upon their religious convictions, which placed value on caring for the poor. At the same time, he was also careful to acknowledge that these values are not the monopoly of churches, and that the secular can be grounded in morality and ethics.

Throughout this speech, Obama interwove his personal religious faith with his outreach strategy. By telling the story of walking down the aisle of his church to affirm his faith, he connected with born-again Christians in the United States. And by urging secularists to refrain from demanding that religious people leave their faith out of the public sphere, he echoed what many believers thought and feared—regardless of the secular differentiation between religion in public and religion as a basis of policies that affect the general public, including the nonreligious. He cunningly referenced his own past as a nonbeliever in order to question the argument that references to God in mandatory public rituals like the Pledge of Allegiance were an infringement on
the rights of nonbelievers. In doing so, Obama made huge concessions to the anti-secularist side, while at the same time still evoking the separation of church and state. He went on to suggest that religious beliefs can be translated into universally understandable values, and that a “sense of proportion” be brought by both sides of the debate (Obama 2007b).

In his Announcement Speech for the candidacy, Obama avoided religious conventions—even the “God bless America” at the end—but included his personal story of faith, the job he was offered by churches as a community organizer, and how he discovered the “true meaning of [his] Christian faith” in the poor neighborhoods in Chicago (Obama 2007a). Thus, in campaigning for the votes of the Democrats, Obama drew on the assumption that his audience would positively respond to a religious message, but spoke about it through the framework of his private belief only.

In his acceptance speech following his nomination as the Democratic Party candidate, this strategy changed dramatically: He used Christian metaphors of compassion and the loving neighbor, Christian terminology like “sister” and “brother,” and when discussing foreign policy announced he would be a Commander in chief “with a clear mission and a sacred commitment” (Obama 2008). His message was strongly framed in religious terms. This carried many problematic implications for the nonreligious, especially if military commitment were legitimized in religious terms (as we know it from the Bush era), and for atheists in the military who might base their service not on religious grounds and therefore might feel misrepresented in the terms “mission” and “sacred commitment.”

And even Obama’s Inaugural Address—which was built around the topic of the American journey—was reminiscent of Bush’s religious rhetoric. He cited the Bible and used language such as “But know this”—a phrase used very often in biblical speech—or “the kindness to take a stranger in.” Obama, who was frequently accused of being secretly a Muslim, most remarkably referenced Christian faith when trying to overcome divisions between conservatives and liberals: “We remain a young nation, but in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things.” However, to overcome a divide with a Bible quote implies an understanding that America was essentially a Christian nation, and marks everyone not under the Christian banner as immature, both spiritually and politically. He bound the ideal of equality and freedom to the “God given promise,” which for atheists is a contradiction in itself. If equality and freedom were
not rights but a promise given by God, then the denial of the idea of God would also mean the denial of these promises.

This Christian undertone to politics took on a new dimension, as he—unlike other presidents—openly acknowledged nonbelievers and non-Christian religious minorities, too: On the one hand he acknowledged plurality, including nonbelievers, and on the other he drew a picture of a fundamentally Christian nation. Notable, too, is that these remarks regarding religious pluralism were placed within the section on foreign policy: after a paragraph about Iraq and Afghanistan, the nuclear threat, and the warming of the planet, and before his address to the Muslim world. This leaves the impression that not only nonbelievers but also other religious minorities were alien to the domestic agenda and therefore—although part of the American patchwork—somehow extraterritorial.

While he openly acknowledged Christian belief and used its rhetorical signals, Obama also sent rhetorical signals to nonbelievers, though not nearly to an equal extent. Still, he used some of their key terms and phrases, such as “restor(ing) science to its rightful place,” or “technology’s wonders.” He even used the term “new age,” which appeals to more spiritualist faiths.

Towards the end, he spoke about “the knowledge that God calls on us to shape an uncertain destiny” which is an interesting combination of the religion-affirming notion that belief in God is “knowledge” and a denial of the validity of the imperialistic term “manifest destiny.” It probably also appealed to the people who were tired of the war and its religious legitimation. And after already establishing the basis for equality on its relationship to God, in his last sentence he went on to associate the ability to carry forth freedom with “God’s grace upon us.” So analyzing his speeches in terms of their civil religious content reveals a much deeper understanding of its meaning for nonbelievers. On the one hand, Obama officially recognized nonbelievers as part of the nation, but on the other he did not hesitate to address the whole nation in religious and particularly Christian terms.

How easy the civil religion and the “ceremonial deism” can be switched to a state supported sectarianism, was apparent when the Supreme Court decided in 2014 in Town of Greece v. Galloway, that even a sectarian prayer at the monthly town board meeting does not violate the Establishment Clause. In a town in the State of New York, where “nearly all of the local congregations are Christian.” also nearly all of the prayer givers have been Christian and some of them spoke in a
“distinctly Christian idiom,” including sentences like: “We acknowledge the saving sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.” The town did not review the “prayers in advance of the meetings nor provided guidance as to their tone or content, in the belief that exercising any degree of control over the prayers would infringe both the free exercise and speech rights of the ministers.” When the plaintiffs Susan Galloway and Linda Stephens insisted on the religious freedom of citizens from religious minorities, and requested that the town limited their prayer practice to “inclusive and ecumenical” prayers that referred only to a ‘generic God’ and would not associate the government with any one faith or belief,” the court ruled that the sectarian prayer “reflected the predominantly Christian character of the town’s congregations” and could not see a violation of the *Establishment Clause* (United States Supreme Court 2014). James Madison warned that “the majority may trespass on the rights of the minority” (1973 [1785]:Art. 1-3). But in the 21st century this seems to be acceptable to the Supreme Court of a country that prides itself for its freedom of religion.

Notwithstanding his campaign rhetoric, Obama is to be credited for progressive legislation that—for the first time—explicitly mentions atheists as a group that needs special protection. On December 16th in 2016, he signed the *Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act*, which amends the *International Religious Freedom Act* of 1998 among other things through the insertion that “The freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is understood to protect theistic and non-theistic beliefs and the right not to profess or practice any religion.” It explicitly mentions “the specific targeting of non-theists, humanists, and atheists because of their beliefs” and condemns “forcibly compelling non-believers or non-theists to recant their beliefs or to convert” (One Hundred Fourteenth Congress of the United States of America 2016:Sec. 2-3). This was not just a hopeful moment for nonbelievers throughout the world. It was also a huge success for American secularists and atheists. Michael Stone ([2007]), a secular blogger who points out that “For the first time, atheists and other nonreligious persons are explicitly named as a class protected by the law,” only comments: “Thanks Obama!”

Ironically—in the light of the attempts to ban Muslims from entering the country under the Trump administration—the bill expresses the “sense of Congress that (1) a policy or practice by the government of any foreign country of routinely denying visa applications for religious workers can be indicative of a poor state of religious freedom in that country; and (2) the United States Government should seek to reverse any such policy by reviewing the entirety of the
bilateral relationship between such country and the United States” (One Hundred Fourteenth Congress of the United States of America 2016:Sec. 2).

The Trump of the Religious—The 2016 Election and Religious Continuities

The little steps towards the recognition of atheists that have been taken under the Obama administration37 have been put in jeopardy since the turbulent campaign of the 2016 election and the Republican recapture of the White House. On November 8, to the surprise of many, real estate entrepreneur and host of the TV-Show *The Apprentice* Donald Trump got elected President—if not by the popular vote, then through the vote of the electoral college. Although the twice-divorced casino-owner is not a devoted churchgoer and certainly does not fit the conservative religiously normed lifestyle his running mate Mike Pence embodies, he won with the support of large parts of the Religious Right.

Polls showed that the more often people went to church, the more likely they voted for Trump, with 56% of those who attend at least once a week as opposed to 31% of those who never attend. Of the religiously unaffiliated, only 26% voted for him. His strongest support group was also the most fundamentalist. Of white Evangelical or born-again Christians, 81% voted for him. In this group, Trump had more support than the former Republican candidates Romney, McCain, and Bush (Smith and Martínez 2016). In order to gain that support despite his nonconformist lifestyle, he promised Evangelicals that he would appoint a conservative Supreme Court justice, would defund Planned Parenthood, protect those who refuse service to same sex weddings and to repeal—along with the whole of the *Affordable Care Act*—the decree that requires coverage for birth control (Goodstein 2016). He even promised to repeal the *Johnson-Amendment*, in order to “protect free speech for all Americans” (Trump 2016). With the repeal of the *Johnson Amendment*, churches would gain a great deal more influence upon politics and elections, which is why critics say it would make churches the new “Super-PACs” (Green 2016).

37 One could also name here that the Democrats in the 2016 election campaigns in at least one case added the nonreligious to the groups that ought to be protected from discrimination, after they have been called to do so by an atheist activist Mehta (2016). However, the platform that was available online did not include this change North Carolina Democratic Party Platform and Resolutions Committee (2016).
On the surface, the personal faith of the candidates did not play a big role in either campaign. However, although his opponent Hillary Clinton definitely had a better record of attending religious services and working with religious groups, she was portrayed as “godless” or a “threat to religious liberty” by people from Tea-Party activist Michele Bachmann to commentators in the *Washington Post* (Bachmann 2016; Thiessen 2016).

But it was not just the promise of religious influence upon the political process, and the hate against “godless” Hillary, that convinced Evangelicals. Zuckerman points out that there are also commonalities between the Trump/Pence campaign and the beliefs of fundamental Christians: Male authority over women has roots in Biblical texts, and according to Numbers 31:7-18 murder is approved by God. Hatred for homosexuals is prescribed in the Bible; Leviticus 18-20 even prescribes that they are to be killed. Evangelical religion, and its insistence upon being the only “truth,” abets fear and hatred for other religions. Religious fundamentalism divides the world between *us* and *them*. Together with racism, a general preference for authoritarianism, and fear or ignorance of science, those commonalities have helped to secure support for Trump among a large percentage of Evangelical Christians (Zuckerman 2016). In addition, as sociologists Andrew L. Whitehead, Samuel L. Perry point out, Christian nationalism was a strong predictor of voting for Trump. People who agreed that the United States should be declared a “Christian nation” by the federal government or that “the success of the United States is part of God’s plan” were more likely to vote for Trump even if controlled for factors like sexism, racism, fear of Muslims, party affiliation, and socioeconomic status. Based on the belief in parallels between America and Old-Testament Israel and combined with an apocalyptic view that Christianity is “under siege,” as the candidate himself has put it, voting for Trump was a response to a perceived threat to a Christian nationalist identity (Whitehead, Perry and Baker 2018).

However, I want to point out a third way in which the seemingly unreligious Trump may have appealed to large parts of the Christian population. In his book-turned-campaign platform—*Great Again. How to fix our crippled America*—he portrays himself as a Christian, and more specifically as a fan of Norman Vincent Peale, whose Marble Collegiate Church he attended and whom he credits for his tremendous self-esteem (Trump 2015:130). Peale is the author of the classic religious self-help bestseller *The Power of Positive Thinking*, in which he taught his readers how “to re-educate the mind and make of it a power-producing plant” by prayer, visualization,
affirmation, and repetition. He also recommends not being troubled by facts that indicate the contrary:

Any fact facing us, however difficult, even seemingly hopeless, is not so important as our attitude toward that fact. How you think about a fact may defeat you before you ever do anything about it. You may permit a fact to overwhelm you mentally before you start to deal with it actually. On the other hand, a confident and optimistic thought pattern can modify or overcome the fact altogether. (Peale 2015:18)

He wants his readers to repeat Bible verses like: “If God be for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31).” Or: “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me. (Philippians 4:13)” (Peale 2015:22, emphasis as in Peale). Those “all things,” for Peale, include not just happiness but also wealth and health.

Today, theologies which take up Jesus’ promise “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10) are often called Prosperity Gospel. According to a poll by *Time* magazine, 17% of Americans self-identify as part of the Prosperity Gospel Movement (as cited in Bowler 2013:6). Prominent preachers like Joel Osteen, pastor at Houston’s Lakewood megachurch, are broadcast through television and online streaming, reaching millions of people. Paula White, who later delivered the invocation at Trump’s inauguration, has helped him to gather support from other Evangelical pastors by holding a prayer meeting for him at Trump Tower (Dias 2016). Additionally, the Prosperity Gospel might also count for a lot of Trump’s appeal among blacks and Hispanics—two groups Trump had repeatedly insulted during his campaign. Mark Burns, a black televangelist who frequently spoke at Trump’s rallies, even said about the election: “Lord, this will be the greatest Tuesday that ever existed, come Super Tuesday Three.” For Burns, “There is no black person, there is no white person, there is no yellow person, there’s only green people! Green is money! Green are jobs!!” (Burns 2016) And the 70-year old, self-proclaimed billionaire running for president may also have scored among those 73% of Hispanic Christians, who agree that “God blesses those who have enough faith with good health and financial success” (Pew Research Center 2007:29–32).

The link between religious virtuousness and economic success is by no means new for the United States. Max Weber had already in 1904 pointed to the relationship between *The Protestant Ethic and
the Spirit of Capitalism—especially in the form of the Calvinist “doctrine of predestination” (Weber 2007 [1905]:56). The Westminster Confession of 1647 outlines that “By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death” (as cited in Weber 2007 [1905]:57–58). For the individual, that doctrine created the cruel question if one is chosen or lost, and how that can be known. Weber describes how pastors have dealt with that problem in their counseling: Where the idea of predestination was not reinterpreted, it was a duty to consider oneself predestined for heaven with absolute self-confidence because every doubt was seen as a sign of insufficient faith. In order to gain that self-confidence, restless worldly activity was commended, because it would diffuse any doubts about oneself. This has led away from the humbleness preached by Luther and has helped the hard Puritan merchants and the self-assured saints of modern capitalism to emerge (Weber 2007 [1905]:66–67).

Of course, the message that God helps the faithful comes at a cost for both those who are poor and those who do not believe in God. According to sociologist Bradley Koch, the teachings of the Prosperity Gospel include that wealth is a blessing from God and that hence, poverty is the result of a lack of faith (Koch 2009:1). The theological link between religious faith, wealth, and health is also the basis of the idea of faith healing. Pat Robertson (2016), an Evangelical TV-preacher who reaches millions of people with his programs, introduced Trump at an event at Regent University with: “And, you know, he’s gone from bankruptcy to $10 billion, so that’s not too shabby.” Robertson propagates about The Mystery of God’s Healing Power (s.a.):

> Jesus went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed of the devil and all who were sick. Everyone who came to him for healing got healed. I don’t know of anybody He turned down, so it is God’s plan and will to heal people—physically as well as spiritually. How do you get it? You have to empty yourself and ask Him.

That in turn implies that those who remain sick are not true believers, or have not emptied themselves enough—and therefore places the responsibility for their sickness upon themselves. Robertson recommends faith healing not just as an addition to medical treatment—as Peale had imagined it—but as a substitute:

You have to be really desperate. When you get desperate with God, things start happening. Why should you want healing if you can go to see the doctor? If you have a
headache, he will give you an aspirin. If you are a little emotional, he gives you Prozac. If you have something wrong with your skin, he scrapes it off. If your hip doesn’t work, he gives you a new one. We have gotten used to doctors and medicine that take care of these things. We are not desperate. But when we begin to get desperate with God, we begin to see miracles. (Robertson s.a.)

If we look at those remarks in the light of the debate about health care and social security, they might actually help to explain the enigma that some of the people who are most likely to depend on this federal safety net are among those who want to abolish it: Their trust in God seems to be stronger than that in government. And in turn, for many the lack of a dependable social system makes trust in God the only way to deal with economic insecurity.  

And already the Westminster Confession, that Weber took as departure point of his analysis, had little sympathy

for those wicked and ungodly men, whom God as a righteous judge, for former sins doth blind and harden, from them He not only withholdeth His grace, whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings and wrought upon in their hearts, but sometimes also withdraweth the gifts which they had […]. (as cited in Weber 57-58)

So, while Donald Trump’s rhetoric is not overtly religious, both his policies and the appeal that he has for parts of the society are rooted in religion nevertheless. The relation of wealth and health to religious virtuousness is only one example for that. Others might be the treatment of religious and ethnic minorities, the “fire and fury” against a so called communist regime, the treatment of women and the disdain against homo- and transsexuals, the disregard for science, and the general authoritarianism of his presidency.

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38 Robertson went even further by indicating that sickness is a punishment from God. When Israel’s Prime Minister Ariel Sharon suffered a stroke, he said “God has enmity” against those who divide His land, because he disapproved of Israel’s withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. While Robertson’s comments met widespread criticism, also from other Christian leaders, his remarks show how a literalistic interpretation of the Bible can legitimize the division of people into those who deserve to be rewarded and those who are to be punished. Also concerning the remarks about Israel, Robertson’s spokesperson Angel Watts defended him by saying that he had simply reminded people of what the Bible says (as cited in CBN (2006)).
And after all, it still seems to be “improper” not to mention God or religion in an Inaugural Address and so even Donald Trump adhered to that:

The Bible tells us, ‘How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity.’ We must speak our minds openly, debate our disagreements honestly, but always pursue solidarity. When America is united, America is totally unstoppable. There should be no fear: We are protected, and we will always be protected. We will be protected by the great men and women of our military and law enforcement, and most importantly, we will be protected by God.

Who, for him, belongs to that unity of “God’s people,” and hence to America, remains to be seen. For all those who do not, “protection” might be required from elsewhere. So if we focus on the continuities and on the longstanding traditions that have enabled Trump, rather than on the disruption that his presidency undoubtedly presents, we might gain some insight into how religion played a part in the current divide of the American society.

**Beyond the End of History—Anti-Atheism in the United States**

The delineations between the in-group and the out-group, as well as the zealotry with which the in-group has been kept in line, show that the “One Nation” was already founded on a divide: that between the religious settlers who came to the United States to establish a society formed according to their religious norms, and those who did not fit into that religious enterprise. Who was excluded by those boundaries, as well as the terms which have been applied to those people, has shifted during the course of American history. Eric R. Schlereth, for example, describes that British North America saw heretics—“traitors to their faith”—as more dangerous than what were called infidels back then, namely Muslims and Jews. When, during the advent of deism in the 18th century, this distinction no longer made sense, it was given up in favor of the term infidel, which encompassed both these “forms of disbelief” (Schlereth 2013:4–5). Marty describes how the term infidel as a “synonym for ‘unbelief’ or ‘freethought’” (Marty 2012 [1961]:11) was used from the 1740s to the end of the 19th century, but in the 20th century was replaced by other terms—among them secularism, materialism, atheism and agnosticism (Marty 2012 [1961]:193). Leigh Eric Schmidt, on the other hand, describes how the village atheist as a “freethinking contrarian” had taken shape in the late 19th century and become an almost mystic figure in the first third of the 20th century (Schmidt 2016:xiii–xv). My highly condensed historical overview has shown that there are more
terms that need to be taken into consideration if we want to understand the relationship between religion and its other. Savage, heathen or pagan—labels like these suggested a lack of civilization, and were able to condemn whole people and cultures based on their alleged nonreligion, legitimizing their oppression or extinction. Terms like idolatry and superstition mark other religious ideas as wrong and harmful by denying their religious character and the privilege that comes with it. Blasphemy, apostasy, and heresy mark people who break with the established religious norms and therefor were applied to nonreligious and religious dissenters alike. In the use of the word profane or the verb profaning, the lack of a religious quality became synonymous with terms like base or pervert. And when nonreligious people are called anti-Christian in a world that imposed Christian principles on them, they are presented as the enemy in a Manichean worldview. Nonconformism to religious norms thereby is identified with an attack on religion. Even secularism as the demand for separation of church and state, which once freed religious minorities from the religious norms of the majority, came to be viewed as an imposition of nonreligion upon the majority of the religious. And the terms kafir and gentile, which are used by Muslims and Jews, show that Christianity is not alone in its division of people according to religious norms.

When in the 1960s, primarily through the effort of the Catholic Church, the “Culture of unbelief” (Caporale and Grumelli 1971, italics added) was explored, such prominent sociologists like Thomas Luckmann, Talcott Parsons, and Robert N. Bellah could not make much sense out of it, because it went against a functionalist understanding of religion and society. Only in the beginning of the 21st century, the religious Nones—the term Glenn Vernon used to refer to people who respond “none” to the question for religious affiliation (Vernon 1968)—attracted scholarly attention as a growing group in the United States. Today, the terminology has shifted to words, which have “religion at its root,” like nonreligion, a-religion and anti-religion. Nonreligion, as Lois Lee, claims carries less historical bias than previous terms (Lee 2012b). However, particularly in a society that is shaped by religious norms as much as the United States, terms like anti-religious, which describe a negative relationship towards religion without considering the way religion deals with its other, show that even serious academic scholarship sometimes is not free from the implications that the religious power structure imposed through the centuries (Klug 2017a).

I have followed this perspective through the currents of over 400 years of American history. That, of course, does not make for an all-encompassing account of American religion, because this would be obviously much broader than the relationship towards nonreligion. And,
unfortunately, it doesn’t make for a comprehensive overview about nonreligion, either. One would have to dedicate much more detailed historical work to the different phases and eras of the discrimination of nonreligion, and there are so many more figures, movements, cases, and laws worth mentioning. What I intend to do with this historical overview, is to show that religion and anti-atheism shaped American history from the very beginning, and continue to do so today. Consequently, we need to start our historical investigation earlier than most studies that focus on atheists do. The history of atheism in the United States did not start with people calling themselves atheists, but with people being called atheists or any other term designed to oppress their claims. It did not start with the first atheists coming out of the closet, but with the conditions which may have prevented others from doing that earlier.

Therefore, it might be helpful to supplement a mere historical view, which tries to determine the content and meaning in those delineations, with a more systematic view that focuses on the function of such terms, and how they allow for these different uses. Terms like infidelity and unbelief create a division between an imagined us and an equally imaginary them. They rest on a prescribed norm of fidelity, whose breach is to be marked and condemned. By leaving open what exactly this norm is—what, for example, proper belief contains—they are applicable in almost any religious fashion. But even terms like atheist, irreligious, or agnostic, which are more precise and are frequently used as self-descriptions, reveal more about what is seen as rightful religion than about those who dissent. They are etymologically structured in a way which reproduces religiosity or more specifically monotheism as a norm. This wording reflects the power of religion over society, not just on a political level or through the rule of majority, but on the most basic level of the language that we use. It is therefore of utter importance that we are aware of both the connotations that those words carry as well as of the way they express their content in a normative way. In short: That we are not just taken in by them, and unreflectively reproduce the differentiation that they imply.

If we go back in American history, religious truth claims have caused a whole number of atrocities. Compared with the horrors of the colonization, of slavery, or the witch hunts, the discrimination of atheists was less extensive. This may have been because atheism is easy to hide, and the belonging is more fluid; even the Puritans experienced that their own children were sometimes only “half way” in the churches. Nevertheless, to say religious discrimination of atheists and unbelievers was less severe is only part of the story, because the notion of unbelief was
often the legitimation for colonialism, racism, and sexism. Their alleged lack of religion justified killing Native Americans as well as stealing their lands. The Bible was, in fact, one of the most important justifications for enslaving the so-called heathen races. And religion imposed gender norms on women, whose breach then was deemed ungodly—an offense not just against the social order, but against the natural order that was created by God (DeBerg 1990). That the ascription of nonreligion was such a useful tool for legitimizing so different forms of oppression shows that religion was not just abused for political purposes—profaned “by committing murder in its name” as Bush had said (2001d)—but that it inherently entails those power structures because it divides the world between an in-group and an out-group. Religious unity was always a myth that needed to be actively enforced in order to persist. Religious convictions vary from generation to generation, from person to person—and even for a single person during the course of their lives. In early America not even among white male settlers could uniformity be achieved. As is the case for all cultural and religious norms, upholding them required violence and power.

It is difficult to identify actual atheists in the early colonies. The Puritans erected and preserved their theocratic system by declaring the colonization a religious project. Dissenters, both religious and nonreligious, were outlawed and persecuted. They were frequently advised to keep their nonreligion to themselves (Schmidt 2016:3–6). Some of them, like Thomas Morton with his *New English Canaan* left traces themselves. We know of many others only through the jeremiads of the theologians who saw godlessness lurking around every corner (McKnight Nichols and Mathewes 2008). We may never be able to determine how many people actually did not believe in God in the quietness of their homes or heads. So, when historians like Rinaldo (2000:1) and Schmidt (2016:3) state that there were no actual atheists in the beginning of the United States, this is only speculation. It might be more accurately to say that there were few atheists who outed themselves as such. What Rinaldo (2000:135) himself had remarked about the 20th century atheists—that they might not need to join groups, might not have a desire to convince others, and were actively discouraged by the negative attitude of the majority of Americans—would be even more true for earlier centuries, with their history of legal discrimination and the threatening laws against blasphemy.

For those reasons it would be not enough to describe, like James Turner (1985), the relationship between the religious and the nonreligious as a purely intellectual endeavor, in which a relentless science gained the upper hand over theology and believe, because it better fits the emerging
economic system. The relationship between religion and nonreligion was always one of power—more precisely, one in which the nonreligious and religious nonconformists stood against resourceful institutions that controlled public and political representation, and therefore influenced not only laws and moral codes but also knowledge and language. And last but not least, when provoked, the religious opinion—as Schlereth has shown for the infidel controversies—sometimes simply responded with “a mob” (Schlereth 2013:31 see also Schmidt 2016:171).

Although the idea of religious freedom was crucial not only for settling in the New World but also for seeking independence from Britain, this freedom was usually limited to a handful of Protestant groups. The Founding Fathers recognized the dysfunctionality of religious conflict in nation building, and established a secular political system through the Constitution. However, the states often defined their own religious tests, which usually explicitly excluded atheists. Again, the terms religious freedom, religious liberty, and to an extent also freedom of religion, reveal in their use in American history and historiography their excluding implications through wording alone: They reflect an understanding that the exercise of religion is protected, while the freedom not to exercise religion—freedom from religion—is at least semantically not included. Therefore, this freedom remains within a decidedly Christian, or sometimes Abrahamic frame, where difference is accepted because of its recognition of some shared beliefs. Consequently, the greater tolerance for different forms of Christianity, and even for other religions, might in turn have sharpened the exclusion of atheists.

This kind of demarcation in the domestic realm was mirrored in the way foreign enemies were portrayed as atheist—be that correct, like in the case of the Soviet regime, or mere projection like with the Nazis. And that, of course, in turn had consequences for the atheists in the country, as they were more closely connected to communism or fascism, regardless of their personal beliefs. After the Second World War, political rhetoric and ritual became even more infused with religion. It became the most significant part of American identity (Kirby 2006). “American Anti-Atheism” has often been interpreted, as for example by Charles Richter, as “Nativism”—a reaction to a perceived foreign threat to America (Richter 2015). And if we focus not just on the World Wars and the Cold War but also on the of the Evangelical Alliance and its fight against the “waves” of unbelief that crash against the American shores (see Warren s.a. [1874]:252), it is clear that anti-atheism and nativism work together perfectly. However, the fight against atheism has
lent credibility not just to America’s relationship to the rest of the world, but to powerful inequalities in terms of race, gender and religion within the country. From the very beginning, even white male settlers like those “truly English” who were not church-members and for whom Robert Child (Child et al. 2009 [1646]) had petitioned, were affected through those anti-atheist norms. They are also directed against American liberals and would make an atheist presidential candidate the least likely to be voted for, even after Muslims and only before socialists (Saad 2015)—who are usually also hated for their atheism. As I have shown, there are a variety of cases in which “foreign” groups were discriminated against on the basis of their alleged or real nonreligion. But in order to function as a negative marker in the first place, anti-atheism has to be seen as a problem in and of itself. Therefore, I would argue that we need to acknowledge it in its own right and in its intersections with other forms of discrimination, rather than treating it as a mere substitute for something else. As a power structure, anti-atheism functions on different levels of society: Besides being a marker for foreign enemies, it also functions on the level of domestic policies, in public institutions and civil religious symbolism, in language, in gender relations and on a purely personal level. In fact, like religion itself, it transcends the realms of public and private because it regulates the most private decisions through the most public measures of public policies. It works through the declarations of presidents and through pushing an atheist child in front of a bus. It is greatly influenced through theologians and such iconic preachers as Dwight L. Moody, Billy Graham, or Jerry Falwell, who reached millions with their sermons. But ultimately, it works only because people integrate those beliefs into their every-day live.

When the religious boundaries shifted towards a nondenominational Evangelicalism, the United States developed something like religious tolerance, but did so in the form of ecumenism or interfaith instead of secularism or the freedom from religious impositions—and thereby permanently excluded the nonreligious from that tolerance. When Will Herberg in 1955 describes America as a triple melting pot of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, he had to forcefully remove the atheists from the picture: “The old-time ‘village atheist’ is a thing of the past, a folk curiosity like the town crier […]. Religion has become part of the ethos of American life to such a degree that overt anti-religion is all but inconceivable.” (Herberg 1960 [1955]:259-206) Schmidt has pointed out, that Herberg’s assumption that the village atheist left “no successor” is not exactly right (Schmidt 2016:250). After losing their battles in the villages, atheists turned to the Supreme Court, where they sometimes even won. Mandatory school prayer or exclusion of atheists from
public office was legally challenged and ultimately forbidden by the Supreme Court. However, this success came at a high price. Secular demands for the removal of compulsory religious ritual were not perceived as the legitimate demand of a minority—as seen several times before in the history of the country—but as an attack on religion itself, as an attempt to take God out of public life. The nonreligious were depicted as militant and obnoxious, as Susan Jacoby (2005:294) has pointed out even by serious and sensitive scholars like Martin E. Marty (see Marty Marty 1996:225–227). Other battles, like that challenging legislative prayer, or the insertion of “One Nation under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance and against the imprint “In God we trust” on money, were not successful. Instances like that were framed as “Ceremonial deism,” which means that they are viewed as too conventional and uncontroversial to be unconstitutional (Gresock 2001:589). However,

by casting certain religious practices as mere ceremonial deism, courts have avoided subjecting these practices to appropriately rigorous legal analysis under the Establishment Clause. Ceremonial deism thus perpetuates the alienation and marginalization of nonbelievers. (Gresock 2001:570)

Furthermore, it allows the justification of other religious practices by allowing for a comparison in which they then do not pose “any more than” those accepted practices an infringement on the rights of nonbelievers (Gresock 2001:606–609).

The so called Culture Wars were not, as Hunter suggested, political disputes in which liberals and conservatives were symmetrical in their “antipathy” (Hunter 1991:156). Instead, religious conservatives fought to maintain or achieve what they perceived as their right to impose their religious norms upon society as a whole, including the nonreligious and liberals. The religious struggle for dominance might with legal scholar Jennifer Gresock be better called “cultural imperialism.” She describes how

“It is easy for believers to ignore the voices of the small minority of atheists. Indeed, some believers seem entirely unaware that atheists even exist. Other believers explicitly assert that because atheists are such a small minority, their rights somehow count less than those of the majority do. Through cultural imperialism, these believers impose a distinct form of oppression upon atheists.” (Gresock 2001:572–573)
Given the various examples in which atheists and nonconformists have been threatened and violently attacked, one would have to add that for some culture warriors the secular system of rights as—in whatever incomplete fashion—represented by the state, does not even matter. Some see themselves in a fight in which they are responsible only to their God.

The myth that America is a nation of believers is perpetuated through the political and public protocol. Particularly the responses to September 11 and the exclusion of atheists from public mourning showed that, in the words of Weiler-Harwell, America has “a de facto religious establishment that mandates both love of God and country for full acceptance as a complete American citizen” (Weiler-Harwell 2011:4).

But aside from the open exclusion or discrimination of atheists, the nonreligious are also affected by laws that are based on religion but apply to them nevertheless. If one considers those cases, too, one could call that an all-encompassing religious—and in most cases specifically Christian—normativity in United States’ law and society. Applying this perspective makes clear that from the early settlements until today there have always been struggles about how the culture is formed, not just on the level of knowledge and language but also on the level of moral behavior. Today, it is not about a women’s right to divorce but about homosexuals’ right to marry. It is not about keeping the stores closed on Sundays, but about keeping “Merry Christmas!” the official slogan for the holidays. It is not about the possibility of teaching evolution in schools, but about faith-based initiatives that use tax-money to push religious norms upon those who they claim to help. In this way, the original divide between the religious in-group and the out-group has been transformed into the societal cleavage between conservatives and liberals which so thoroughly divides America today. And even anti-immigrant sentiments are often framed in religious terms. So, there are a number of continuities which run through American history, all of which made it difficult and sometimes dangerous for atheists to come out and express their unbelief.

Yet, the 21st century has also brought real change. For the first time, America as a nation was actually attacked for its belief—or from the perspective of the attackers, for its unbelief. Against the progressive hope that “we are improving from age to age” (Ingersoll 2006 [1900]:348) but also the neo-conservative notion of the “end of history” (Fukuyama 1989) in which the last alternative to the liberal society has disappeared with the fall of the Berlin Wall, September 11 brought back religion as a totalitarian option. That raises the question of how, in the long run, America will answer that global threat. The first reactions were distinctively religious, and usually
Christian. It remains to be seen which effect that will have not just on the Muslim minority but also on the growing number of atheists in the country. After all, there is a new international conflict in which the ascriptions of unbelief have regained their violent power. That the most orthodox American Christians—however that might be defined—are now as much a target as atheists is more than an irony of history. It points to a basic mechanism that religion even in the 21st century shows almost universally and internationally: The division of people in those of the righteous faith and those, who are seen as nonconformist to the religious norms that are ingrained.
STUDYING DATA WITH SENSITIVITY AND REFLEXIVITY

So far, almost no qualitative research has been conducted regarding the question of how believers think and feel about atheists. The empirical research that has been done so far was mainly quantitative and used pre-formulated items. Therefore, my own research design uses qualitative methods and an exploratory research design. For areas where little theoretical insight is available, a Grounded Theory-approach is suitable (Creswell 2013:83–89). This approach was developed in the 1960s by the sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. It was meant as an alternative to a sociology that was mainly concerned with verifying the “grand theories” of “great men” instead of developing new ones. According to Glaser and Strauss one should “study an area without any preconceived theory that dictates, prior to research, ‘relevancies’ in concepts and hypotheses.” This allows patterns to emerge out of data and enables the researchers to generate a theory applicable to the field under examination. Such a theory then would be “grounded” in data (Glaser and Strauss 2006 [1967]:33–34).

Grounding Theory in Data

At the center of the Grounded Theory-approach is the method of constant comparison. The entities, which are compared, are not determined prior to the research. Rather they are chosen in a process called Theoretical Sampling, which happens in alternation to the analysis. This means that new data is selected throughout the process of analyzing. The researcher goes back and forth between the coding of the data and the sampling of new data, which is selected according to the theoretical insights gained from the analysis. In order to develop a theory, entities of maximal and minimal difference should be included. Maximizing the differences between the studied entities helps to collect varied data. Through the inclusion of entities that differ only minimally, the researcher can verify the categories already found and enhance their description. The similarities between entities with maximal differences provide the most general information about the field.
(Glaser and Strauss 2006 [1967]:55–56). Throughout this process, new insights about categories or hypotheses are collected in memos from which the theory is formulated later (Glaser and Strauss 2006 [1967]:113). This process is performed until a state of “theoretical saturation” is reached in which “no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category.” (Glaser and Strauss 2006 [1967]:61) If one encounters repetition despite systematic attempts to find new contrasting cases, a category is theoretically saturated (see also (Glaser and Strauss 2006 [1967]:101–115).

The Grounded Theory-approach was later further developed by Glaser (1978), Strauss and sociologist Juliette Corbin (1998; 1987) as well as by sociologist Kathy Charmaz (2006, 2008). Glaser and Strauss differ insofar as Glaser rejects the inclusion of theoretical knowledge pre-existing to the study and the use of verification-processes throughout the research (Glaser and Tarozzi 2011, Walker and Myrick 2006, Strübing 2007, Kelle 2005). My use of the Grounded Theory method—although occasionally inspired by Glaserian ideas—is mainly influenced by Strauss and Corbin, because they give the most practical tools for handling and interpreting the data. Additionally, I found Charmaz’ (2008) approach helpful, as she combines Grounded Theory with some aspects of constructionism respectively constructivism. She acknowledges that participants may have different constructs of reality and advises to show at least parts of the participant’s perspectives, in the form of interview material, instead of merely describing them or forming theory from them. Charmaz (2008) as well as Strauss and Corbin (1998) explicitly point out that researching with their method is not about the rigid following of procedures. Rather, “it is the ability to put them together in flexible and creative ways through microanalysis that enables the analyst to rise above the commonplace and develop truly innovative but grounded theory.” (Strauss and Corbin 1998:71) Therefore, instead of further explaining the method in a dry run, I will explain how I realized this approach in my research design and where I expanded on their recommendation through specific adaptions or other methodological approaches.

**Research Question, Literature Review, and Sensitizing Concepts**

Grounded Theory starts with an open question, rather than a set of hypotheses. The question should not be so broad as to become arbitrary but also open enough not to prevent discovery (Strauss and Corbin 1998:40–41). From an initial interest in the relationship between the religious and the nonreligious in different societies, I narrowed my scope down to the question of how atheists are perceived and dealt with in the United States.
As it is the goal of a Grounded Theory project to create new theories, it is crucial to set aside previous theoretical knowledge about the subject at least to a certain extent, in order to be open for new interpretations. Recommendations about the question of if and how much literature is to be consulted before the actual study differ widely: Glaser recommends to stay away from literature about the field because “[t]o undertake an extensive review of literature before the emergence of a core category violates the basic premise of Grounded T[heory]—that being, the theory emerges from the data not from extant theory. It also runs the risk of clouding the researcher’s ability to remain open to the emergence of a completely new core category that has not figured prominently in the research to date thereby thwarting the theoretical sensitivity.” (Glaser 2007:58) Strauss and Corbin on the other hand acknowledge that a “researcher brings to the inquiry a considerable background in professional and disciplinary literature” (Strauss and Corbin 1998:48). According to them, it can help to make comparisons between the data and the literature in order to increase sensitivity. Descriptive literature can be used similarly to field notes, and published interview material can be used as secondary source. Literature can stimulate questions before and during the research process; and when the analysis is done, one can set the findings in relation to the previous works (Strauss and Corbin 1998:48–52). Of course, the stance one takes toward a certain topic stems from a certain theoretical question or outlook and is shaped through the context of the researcher. Charmaz, therefore, goes even further than Strauss and Corbin and includes the use of “Sensitizing Concepts” (Charmaz 2006:16–18). The term was brought up by sociologist Herbert Blumer in his essay *What Is Wrong with Social Theory?* in which he sought to bridge the gap between social theory and empirical research. A sensitizing concept is not definite. It does not come with a clear definition and fixed benchmarks. “Instead, it gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look.” (Blumer 1954:7)

After a short screening of the literature relevant for my project, it became apparent that little research in general and almost no qualitative research has been done on the question of how atheists are perceived through believers. So the danger of sticking to the literature was relatively small. Nevertheless, at certain points I had to free myself from the existing concepts and frames: I found for example, that some of my interviewees deny in a number of different ways that actual atheists exist—something that is not described in the literature before. If I would have focused only on pre-existing concepts of prejudice of discrimination, I would have missed that
completely. In other cases, it would not be sufficient to describe an attitude as “prejudice,” because it might address actually existing differences, but interpret it in the light different moral frameworks. So, instead of starting out with terms like that, I used them as sensitizing concepts, compared them to the data and to each other, but tried to work as open as possible. This process was very helpful for making my own preconceptions visible—to the reader, but foremost to myself—although, of course, this is a task that never can fully be completed.

Charmaz’ (2008, 2006) approach takes into account that theory does not simply “emerge” out of data. A theory is constructed through an author, who at the same time is driven by special interests in and positions towards the subject. It is not only the professional knowledge of a researcher that influences the stance taken on a problem; also the personal background is important. First and foremost, I was not born in the United States and have never been there before my eleven-month long stay for the research. This has disadvantages because many things were new and unfamiliar to me, needed more time to be understood, and sometimes even stayed enigmas. But it also brings the advantage of being able of see things and cultural circumstances which might be too familiar to the local to be noticed. Furthermore, knowing different cultural contexts helps to see not only the differences within one context but also the differences to other contexts, and therefore to see what makes a certain country unique. Being raised in East Germany and having studied in the Arabic world for a while, I am able to compare the United States to completely different contexts: One being predominantly secular, the other often characterized through a lack of religious freedom and choice. With these comparisons in mind, I was often stunned by the varieties of different relationships between the religious and the nonreligious in the United States. Second, it might be important that I was raised a liberal Protestant (Evangelisch) in a mixed but very harmonic Christian and atheist household. From there stems a strong conviction that (non-) religion should not just be private, but personal and free from any pressure or force. From that background also stems the experience that this is actually possible.

**Interviewing and Transcription**

The empirical data-core of my study consists of interviews. Next to believers, I also interviewed both atheists and experts. However, I used only the interviews with believers as empirical material, because they showed best the different assumptions and attitudes towards atheists (and often toward other groups). Between 2012 and 2017, I conducted altogether 92 in-depth and
focus group interviews with believers of different backgrounds, although the differentiation between believers and nonbelievers sometimes was blurred through complex self-identifications or through indifference to religion. All but two interviews were recorded; in one case the recording was destroyed.

In-depth interviews are unstructured interviews that allow for data-collection in “breadth and depth” (Legard, Keegan and Ward 2003:148). They start with broad questions, which allows the interviewees to express their experiences or their views in their own relevance structure and terms. The interview is characterized through flexible probing and open questions, that stimulate descriptions but also through specific follow-up questions that either ask for more detailed information on topics brought up by the interviewee or cover areas that have not been included yet (Legard, Keegan and Ward 2003:148–156).

Focus group interviews are interviews with a group of people. They provide data on a number of individuals at the same time, but can also give an insight in how groups as such mediate a certain topic (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009). They reflect “the social constructions—normative influences, collective as well as individual self-identity, shared meanings—that are an important part of the way in which we perceive, experiences and understand the world around us.” (Finch and Lewis 2003:172, Bloor 2001:57). Here, as in the in-depth interviews, one gives an open stimulus in form of a question or topic in the beginning and allows the participants to express their own relevancies. It is a common critique against focus-groups interviews that they put a certain pressure on the participant to answer in a socially desirable way (Finch and Lewis 2003:188). As I interviewed pre-existing groups, in which people knew each other either through their religious activities or otherwise, this problem might be even more severe. This means that the opinions expressed in a group interview might not be the same as that expressed if I had interviewed the individual alone because of the social norms that exist in the group. But as I am interested exactly in these normative processes—this is actually intended here, as it gives an insight in how religious norms function.

Most of my interviews with believers were conducted spontaneously after services or other religious meetings. I usually attended the event as a visitor and asked people before or after to give me an interview. Sometimes, I was directed to a religious official or a volunteer who gave the interview or pointed my request to the members of the congregation. Obviously, the very situation in which I interviewed might have had an impact on people. Some may have seen in me
a seeker who actually is interested in their church, or an opportunity to present their church as open to new people. Furthermore, the religious setting might have caused an over-emphasis on religious norms like love and compassion. Therefore, I also conducted some interviews asking people more or less randomly in the streets, in front of supermarkets or at their workplaces. Here I could not foresee if my respondents were religious or not and sometimes noticed my own bias, assuming, for example, that people in rural areas in Texas must be believers.

Before the interview, I introduced myself as a researcher, giving the interviewees my name and affiliation and informing them that it is a doctoral-project about the relationship between the religious and the nonreligious, sometimes adding that it was about how they “approach nonbelievers or atheists.” In some contexts, the scheme was altered and improvised, for example, when the interview started with an informal conversation, or when participants were joining and leaving the site at different times. Through the spontaneous arrangement, it was not always possible to place the exact same stimulus in the beginning. After trying out different possibilities, I usually asked, “What comes to your mind—or to your heart—when you think of atheists?” The further questions then varied according to the topics that came up in the interview, and were too diverse to be summed up here, as the interviewees expressed very different thoughts and feelings. Whenever personal encounters or relationships with atheists were brought up, I tried to gain more information about these concrete incidents. If participants asked what specifically is important in the interview, I told them that everything that was important to them was important to me. If the interviewees did not cover certain topics in their response to the stimulus, I usually tried to include the following questions:

- “Do you notice any difference in behavior between atheists and believers?”
- “How is it here in your town/city?”
- “How would you feel if a family member were an atheist?”
- “What comes to your mind, if you think of the term secular?”
- “Do you notice conflicts between the religious and the nonreligious in politics?”
- “What would you change in society if you could?” and
- “Would you vote for an atheist?”

In 2017, I additionally asked

- “What do you think about Donald Trump?” and
“Do you think Donald Trump believes in God?”

However, it was not always possible to ask the complete set of questions. I always preferred to give interviewees enough time to express their thoughts in their own systems of relevance. If there was time left at the end of the interview, I usually asked, “Do you want to add something? Maybe something I did not ask for?” and that question often led to the most interesting answers.

The acceptance of the interview-process has been overwhelmingly positive. I found that many participants quickly interpreted the given information in their own terms and interests and were eager to talk to me. The study was conducted anonymously. In order to assure the best protection of privacy, I did not ask for the participant’s names, and therefore also did not work with written agreements. This facilitated the research process and helped to make people more comfortable sharing their thoughts.

All but two Spanish-speaking interviews were conducted in English. Depending on the situation, the length of the interviews differs from a few minutes, when the interviewees were in a hurry or didn’t speak English very well, to over 90 minutes in a group interview. Parts of the material were transcribed by myself, but the biggest part has been transcribed by a verbatim transcription service and was then time-stamped and where necessary corrected by me.

**Data Analysis, Interpretation, and Coding**

The first step in analyzing data in Grounded Theory is the coding of the material. Again, recommendations on how to code differ between different approaches towards the method. I found the approach of Strauss and Corbin most helpful, because they suggest a number of practical techniques. Coding relies on a “Microscopic Examination of data” in order to generate initial categories and to find out about the relationships among them. That means that, at least in the beginning, data is analyzed word-by-word or line-by-line (Strauss and Corbin 1998:57). During this microanalysis different techniques and analytic tools are used. Comparison is the most fundamental principle in order to advance analysis: “Using comparison brings out properties, which in turn can be used to examine the incident or object in the data.” (Strauss and Corbin 1998:80) For Strauss and Corbin, there are two types of theoretical comparisons: First, the flip-flop technique, where a concept “is turned ‘inside-out’ or ‘upside down’” or where one looks at “opposites or extremes to bring out significant properties.” Second, “the systematic comparison of two or more concepts, which can be broken down further to the making of ‘close-
Another technique is questioning. In general, the researcher should always ask, “What is going on?” in a given interview or situation. More specific questions then would be: “Who? When? Why? Where? What? How? How much? With what results?” (Strauss and Corbin 1998:89–90) Furthermore, I used the technique to analyze just a single word or sentence. This means that one lists all the possible meanings of the piece and then gets a much broader understanding of the term under scrutiny (Strauss and Corbin 1998:60). A last technique that I used, on the recommendation of Strauss and Corbin, is to watch out for totalizing terms like “never” or “always” and so on. They might be indicators of bias and should raise questions, which can be fruitfully used for further analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1998:97–98).

Unlike Glaser, who suggests a two-step model of Substantive Coding—consisting of Open and Selective Coding—and Theoretical Coding (for an overview of the differences between Glaser and Strauss regarding the Coding process see Walker and Myrick 2006), Strauss and Corbin differentiate between three phases of coding: In Open Coding the data is labeled with a certain term or phrase; similar instances are coded in the same way. Together they build a concept which derives from data, a so-called category. Categories are reworked constantly during the process. Similar concepts can be merged together and new aspects in the data can form new categories. This process enables the researcher to fully describe a phenomenon and to find new aspects in the data (Strauss and Corbin 1998:101–121). Once a category is established, in the process of Axial Coding one codes everything that is related to the category in order to lay out the properties and dimensions of a category, to identify the conditions, actions, and consequences linked to a phenomenon, to relate a category to its according subcategories, and to look through the data for cues that denote how categories are related to each other (Strauss and Corbin 1998:123–142). Finally, through the process of Selective Coding, the theory is integrated and refined (Strauss and Corbin 1998:143–161).

My work differs from Strauss and Corbin as they recommend choosing a central category, which “represents the main theme of the research” (Strauss and Corbin 1998:146, critical on that Charmaz 2006:120) as well as the use of their coding paradigm or matrix. As the latter focusses on procedures (Strauss and Corbin 1998:127) and my research was centered on assumptions and perceptions, this was barely applicable (see also Charmaz 2006:120). In order to avoid forcing the
data into a paradigm it did not fit in, I followed Udo Kelle’s recommendation to work with my own paradigms (Kelle 2005:21).

The last step on the way to a Grounded Theory is to refine and validate the developed theory through a review regarding internal consistency and logic, and through filling poorly developed categories or trimming excess ones (Strauss and Corbin 1998:156). Here, again, I differ slightly from the recommendations of Strauss and Corbin: They suggest that the emerging theory “should be recognizable to participants” (Strauss and Corbin 1998:161). This might be a reasonable claim for the study of practices in a professional field like health care, where the Grounded Theory-approach was developed. But as my study includes the examination of prejudices and discrimination, it is hardly to be expected that all participants find themselves mirrored in the results.

I collected the codes, categories and ideas resulting from the data analysis in so-called memos. They contain a “record of analysis, thoughts, interpretations, questions, and directions for further data collection.” (Strauss and Corbin 1998:110) When the number of memos grew, I used the program Atlas.ti for the Coding and Memoing and, of course, memos were very helpful to me in the process of sampling and generating theory.

While the Grounded Theory method is generally well suited for focus-group interviews, the latter add potential levels of analysis to the data, as they allow for analysis on the individual level, the group level and the level of interaction (2009:5). I usually analyzed the data on the individual level and only occasionally included information about the interaction when, for example, two people discussed and differed in their opinion about what it means to be an atheist. However, because I interviewed alone, group members that did not take part in the discussion—a very seldom case—were not separately interviewed although they could have been important sources for dissenting views.

Theoretical Sampling, Research Contexts, and Sample Description

Theoretical Sampling is a process of “data gathering driven by concepts derived from the evolving theory and based on the concept of ‘making comparisons,’ whose purpose is to go to places, people, or events that will maximize opportunities to discover variations among concepts and to densify categories in terms of their properties and dimensions.” (Strauss and Corbin
In order to be able to maximize the differences between the societal contexts in which I gather my data, I decided on two research contexts that differ widely in terms of religious and secular culture: Texas and California, where I did fieldwork for altogether eleven months. While Texas lies in the so-called “Bible Belt” and has a low percentage of nonreligious people (Pew Research Center 2015d), California is known for its liberal pluralistic spirit and has—compared to other states in the United States—a relatively high number of nonreligious people (Pew Research Center 2015c; for comparison to the United States as a whole: Pew Research Center 2015a). But they not only differ. As the two biggest, most populated states in the United States (U. S. Census Bureau s.a.) they are important indicators for the general situation in the United States, and set trends through their sheer population rate. Sensitive tools like textbooks, for example, are often printed according to standards of one of the two states, in order to serve a bigger market (Walker 2010; Collins 2012).

Strauss and Corbin differentiate between four ways of gathering data (Strauss and Corbin 1998:208–209):

1. Interview-partners or research sites can be chosen based on categories that have emerged through the analysis.
2. They can be sampled on the basis of convenience or availability.
3. The theoretical sensitive researcher can stumble over something new, which then is to be included.
4. And a fourth form is to go back to data, which already has been coded and look for information on newly developed categories.

As they recommended, I combined all of these ways in my study, as I will explain here with just one example each:

1. The most fundamental strategy was to gather new data trying to maximize or minimize differences on the basis of the categories I’ve found. For example, is it a frequent pattern that Evangelical Christians see it as a task or as a duty to get in contact with people who do not believe (or do not believe in the same way) and convince them to accept “Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior.” From there I developed the category of “mission.” For a maximal contrast, I included religious groups that in general are not
engaged in missionary activities, like Jews. In order to develop the category further, I also included Evangelicals that do missionary work in slightly different settings or with a slightly different outlook.

2. Beside this purposeful search for data, I used every opportunity to interview that was offered along the way. I approached people more or less randomly, for example, when I passed a church on my way and noticed that people were there. Other interview partners I approached at a street fair, where they were handing out information. But I also found interview partners in settings that were not religious as such, for example in parking lots or in front of supermarkets. I found it important to perform my Theoretical Sampling from several starting points because it helped to include unexpected and interesting new material, which I might not have found just following the categories that have already emerged in my data. It therefore reduced the risk of overlooking important aspects.

3. Furthermore, I included developments that seemed theoretically relevant. When, for example, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States with significant support of the religious right, I went back to the field and included questions regarding Trump and his relation to religion in the interviews.

4. But it also was an important part of my sampling strategy to go back to data, which I’ve already analyzed, and to analyze it further. Through a re-working with new information and new questions, I was able to fill gaps between categories, to develop categories in regard to their properties and dimensions, and create new categories and concepts. That means that I started out trying to maximize differences, with a purposeful sampling strategy based on the newly discovered categories, through the inclusion of important new developments and the random sampling. Towards the end it became more important to sample within the data which is broad enough to include a variety of differences also on aspects that I did not specifically sample for.

In terms of locations and contexts, my sample includes a politically conservative and a liberal state. But my analysis showed that the differences within each of these states are actually bigger

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59 As it is obvious from the examples, I do not mean random in the sense of statistics where often special procedures are performed in order to assure that “each possible sample of a given size is equally likely to be the one obtained.” Weiss (2012:11).
than the differences between them, and I further included vibrant cities like Austin and San Francisco as well as rural areas in both Texas and California, as well as places that are diverse in their religious demography and ones which are more homogenous.

I included majority and minority religions, people who knew atheists in person and people who said that they don’t, people with changing religious biographies who were, for example, atheists themselves earlier in their lives, as well as people who always were firm in their faith. I also included religious specialists and laypeople, people that were affiliated with bigger or smaller congregations, as well as unaffiliated persons. I included people who hold more conservative or orthodox religious views, as well as people who are liberal in matters of faith and an interfaith group. And, of course, I included a whole variety of different religions and denominations. In Grounded Theory, demographic concepts like gender, age, and ethnicity also have to “earn their way” into the analysis in order to be considered theoretically important—and they did. I included people of different genders and sexual orientations, of different ages and ethnic backgrounds.60

**Theorizing, Saturation, and Generalizability**

A subsequent question that arises in Theoretical Sampling is how long to sample and how much data to gather. The typical answer is until “theoretical saturation” is reached and each category is “saturated.” For Strauss and Corbin, “[t]his means until (a) no new or relevant data seem to emerge regarding a category, (b) the category is well developed in terms of its properties and dimensions demonstrating variation, and (c) the relationships among categories are well established and validated” (Strauss and Corbin 1998:212). Nevertheless, it is actually contested if there is such a state as being theoretically saturated. Social scientist Ian Dey calls the term an “unfortunate metaphor” as it is a contradiction to state that no new properties are found before all data has been coded. He therefore would prefer the term “theoretical sufficiency” and describe the categories as “suggested” by the data (Dey 1999:257). I find his arguments compelling. But—unlike the term sufficiency—the term saturation refers not necessarily to a certain point that was reached; it can also be applied gradually. A theory or category can be saturated to a certain extent. Therefore, I still would prefer the term saturation, although I mean

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60 A demographic concept that came up surprisingly seldom was the socioeconomic status, which was almost never even mentioned. Here again, one could show the difference between quantitative and qualitative methods: While quantitative methods are able to determine that the income of atheists is significantly higher if not controlled for education which is also significantly higher Pew Research Center (2012), this is not possible—and not aimed for—in a qualitative study.
richness rather than completeness. This is not just a sophistry. Especially in a study that not only aims for the explanation of key categories but also for the description of a range of possibilities, one never can reach totality, as social processes are infinite. But I think that it is possible to identify the most typical forms.

Although the sample size of my study exceeds that of some quantitative studies, the sample is not representative in the sense of random sampling. Generalizability in qualitative methods is not reached through the reproduction of the statistical distribution in society but through the selection of cases according to their theoretical importance (Schwandt 2007; Stoddart 2004). Therefore, I abstained from quantifications as far as possible and only occasionally included information about the prevalence of a pattern, e.g. marking something as an exception. So, the goal of the study was not to generalize or to determine the extent of anti-atheism in the United States, but to show the range of assumptions about atheists and how they interplay with the religious belief of the interviewees. I included, for example, several street preachers in my sample. Of course, a street preacher is not representative of religious people and, of course, only a very small portion of the population engages in street preaching. But for the experience of the atheists and for forming public discourse, the one person at the corner holding a sign saying “Hell awaits you!” might be more important than the other hundreds of people they pass every day who do not hold signs. So, my sampling also included aspects of influence and visibility.

I cannot stress enough that I describe and analyze typical patterns in my study, not general or generalized characteristics of a group. I identified typical patterns of ascriptions to atheists and the connections to religious belief, which repeated themselves in the answers. That does not mean that all of these patterns exist among all of the interview partners. Some of those fragments contradicted each other, sometimes even when they came from the same person. But in a way, they still entailed a certain logic that could be reconstructed. So, my work is not so much about individual religious people or groups, it is about re-occurring discursive fragments in which atheists are constructed as an other. As a re-construction of basic meaning and discourse, my work itself is a construction, as in the end every bit of knowledge is. I am sure other scholars would have interpreted my results differently, and therefore I tried to include at least some other interpretations in my analysis.

I also want to point out that generalizability in the sense that my research findings can be transferred to other cultural contexts is not given. The presented theory might contain certain
aspects that can be found in other cultural contexts, too. But anti-atheism has a completely
different quality in places that are religiously homogenous or even theocratic, that are dominated
by polytheist religions, or that are predominantly secular. I hope to have laid out the research
process in a way that contextualizes not only my methods but also my claims. I present—and
generalize—what is typical; I do not generalize for the religious in general or for the analyzed
religious groups. The extent to which the found patterns are spread within the American society
or different religious and cultural contexts can later be determined through quantitative studies.

Presentation

Finally, I have to point out a number of things regarding the presentation of my research: Due to
our habits of reading and writing, I had to present my research design in a linear way in this
chapter. The actual research process of a Grounded Theory-approach is not linear though, but
rather circular, going back and forth between field, data and theory construction multiple times.
And the problem I faced presenting the circular research process in this chapter actually
translates into the presentation of the whole study. Sometimes it can even be misleading: The
overview about the different approaches towards nonreligion in the beginning of my study, for
example, and the explanation of the specifics of my approach, were not written prior to the
fieldwork, as the order of the finished work may suggest. My results are actually the product of a
number of circular steps: going through the data, coming up with ideas, following them through
data, dropping them, finding new concepts, following them through data, and finally finding
them to fit. Looking for its facets and varieties, properties, and dimensions, conceptualizing it’s
relationships towards other concepts, sorting out which of the concepts are most important,
which are typical and finally building a pattern out of them. But in order to spare the reader
repetition—and chaos—I presented my findings in this book without constantly disclosing the
research process.
Personal Data and the Protection of Privacy

An important point in a study dealing with sensitive personal information is the protection of the privacy of the participants. I informed the participants before the interview that it would be recorded and assured anonymity. The interviewed children were accompanied by a parent or a guardian. For privacy reasons, I did not ask for the participants names in the interviews. Nevertheless, I sometimes know their first names because they told me anyway or because they were called by their names by others, for example, in the focus groups. In the presentation of the results, I will change any data that can link the answers to a specific person in order to protect their privacy. This is especially true for participants’ names, the names of their religious institutions, their exact age and their workplace information. Furthermore, I do not specify the names of the places in which I interviewed them. Instead, I use a scale-based anonymization. There exists considerable debate about how to define the terms “city” and “town.” For maintaining simplicity, I classify exclusively by population size, thereby leaving out factors like political impact, existence of facilities, or offered services. Furthermore, I do not consider the potential legal differences between cities and towns. For places smaller than 500,000 inhabitants, I use the following anonymization: Village: 1-1000; Small town: 1,001-10,000; Mid-sized Town: 10,001-50,000; Large Town: 50,001-100,000; Small City: 100,001-500,000. In some cases—for example, if it is about very small religious groups—even places larger than 500,000 inhabitants are anonymized. I refer to them as cities. Age groups are defined as follows: Child: till the age of 12; teenager 13-19; young person: 20-35; middle-aged person: 36-65; senior person: over 65. As it was not always possible to collect complete demographic information, some ages are based upon estimates. Other information that might allow for the personal identification of people is left out or—where considered of relevance—presented in general terms. People who act publicly—for example street preachers—are anonymized as much as possible, but the public nature of their engagement does not always make it possible to make them unrecognizable. Church sizes are specified only where they were considered of relevance, mainly if they were exceptionally small (attendance 50 or fewer people) or large (over 2000 people, megachurch).
ANALYZING ANTI-ATHEISM

In recent years, interest in atheists has grown within the study of religion and sociology, but most works in this field still focus primarily on the question how the nonreligious relate relative to religion. Given the long history of anti-atheism, surprisingly little research has been done on the other side of this relationship—the question of how the religious relate to the nonreligious.

Empirical studies on anti-atheist prejudice and attitudes are available as far back as the mid-20th century: To my knowledge, the first researchers who investigated opinions about atheists were the group connected with sociologist and philosopher Theodor W. Adorno, in their extensive study about the *Authoritarian Personality*. Unfortunately, only a few of the answers made their way into the final report, which deals primarily with the preconditions of fascism and anti-Semitism. However, in the 1950s and 60s the topic began to gain greater attention: In 1954, a study about the civil liberties of nonconformists by sociologist Samuel Stouffer found that 60% of the respondents favored the removal of a book critical of church and religion from a public library, and 84% would not allow a person critical of these institutions to teach in college (Stouffer 1955:32). In a Gallup poll from 1958, atheists scored lowest among the respective groups in survey taker’s willingness to elect them for president, with 77% of people responding that they would not vote for one. In 1962, Rabbi Eugene Lipman and Albert Vorspan, a leading figure in Reform Judaism, stated that atheists “have become second-class citizens, to some degree.” They describe, for example, how atheists are discriminated against, for example, in the question of adoption rights, how atheist became a derogatory term for Jews, and how they lack political representation (Lipman and Vorspan 1962:117, 239, 315-316).

The acceptance of atheists has increased over the years, but that rise is significantly less than that in the acceptance of other discriminated groups (Jones and Saad 2012). In the 21st century, surveys show that being an atheist is still the most negative trait a candidate for the Presidency
can have, even after having an extramarital affair, being gay or lesbian, having used marijuana, or never having held office before (Lipka 2015). In 2016, still only 58% of Americans would vote for an atheist, compared to 93% who would vote for a Catholic, 91% who would vote for a Jew, 81% for a Mormon, and even 60% who would vote for a Muslim. This disdain against atheists is only exceeded by that for socialists (McCarthy 2015)—who are, of course, usually also considered atheists. While those quantitative measures give an insight into the sheer extent of anti-atheist attitudes, they tell us little about the contents of and the rationale of such views. Therefore, in my study, I asked the religious what they think and feel about atheists.

To focus on the believers perspective does not limit me to a mere reproduction of their view. In disciplines that deal with different cultures and belief systems, researchers usually distinguish between emic and etic perspectives. This differentiation goes back to Kenneth Pike, a linguist, who created the terms in reference to the terms phonetic and phonemic. “Emic descriptions provide an internal view, with criteria chosen from within the system. They represent to us the view of one familiar with the system and who knows how to function within it himself.” Etic descriptions, on the other hand, study “behavior as from outside of a particular system” (Pike 1967:37–38).

For a study that includes prejudice and discrimination, it would hardly be enough to just reproduce the believers’ views. Therefore, I reconstruct also the latent meanings that they entail in order to come to a description of their views in etic terms, and hence to build theory out of data. The term latent here goes back to psychoanalytical theories and means “being psychically unconscious.” Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, brought to light that only part of humans’ psychical acts are conscious. Other affective structures and ideas are repressed and come into consciousness only in distorted forms. A thorough analysis may discover this latent content (Freud 2010). While Freud mainly analyzed dreams, parapraxes and pathological symptoms, some of his concepts were fruitfully adapted into social scientific research, particular where it deals with prejudice, discrimination and authoritarianism (e.g. Adorno et al.; Allport 1979). After psychodynamic theories fell out of favor for some time, at least since the beginning of the 21st century they were rediscovered and supported through psychological and sociological evidence.

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61 This is not to be confused with the latency period in human development, which is also a term used in psychoanalysis.
Today, it is widely understood that aspects of prejudice and stereotypes can be unconscious (Newman and Caldwell 2005).

An analysis of unconscious or latent components of this perception implies that people may not intentionally exclude or discriminate. In fact, in many cases, this is the very opposite of how people consciously think they behave. Therefore, I hope my analysis might be of interest not just or the atheists but also for the religious, and will open a discussion about anti-atheism in the United States which is long overdue.

In the following chapters, I will reconstruct reoccurring patterns in the beliefs and opinions of my interviewee partners and interpret them. I will start with the ways in which people actually define atheists and nonbelievers and delineate them from themselves and from other believers. Then I will focus specifically upon the case of the denial of atheists’ existence and how that can be read as an answer to doubts in a theological thinking that involves the risk of damnation. From there, I reconstruct some of the conditions for anti-atheism, explain the roles of doubt and fear, and discuss the relationship between religion, prejudice and authoritarianism. It follows a description of the Manichean worldview that some believers hold and of some typical answers to the theodicy problem. I will give an overview about typical stereotypes regarding atheists and reconstruct how those processes of ascription tell us something about the believers themselves. In the last parts, I will describe some typical attitudes towards atheists and reconstruct the underlying trait that lies beneath them.

In order to adhere to the idea of Grounded Theory of creating theory from data, my presentation primarily follows the internal structure of the data itself rather than preformulated hypotheses and theories. But it does discuss some approaches to prejudice and anti-atheism in light of that data. This will not lead to a neatly structured overview or a new grand theory. Instead, it is a first exploration of the forms, the internal conditions, and the outward indicators of anti-atheism.

**Drawing the Line—Delineations and Definitions of Atheists**

Most of the studies about the discrimination of atheists assume that people know what atheists are (see e.g. Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann 2006; Gervais, Shariff and Norenzayan 2011). But that there is no clear definition of atheism among atheists or even scientists (see e.g. Draper 2017; Nielsen s.a.), makes it unsurprising that there are no clear definitions among believers either.
Therefore, I started my analysis with the more basic question of who is actually seen as an atheist or a nonbeliever, and related that to some definitions of nonreligion that are currently discussed in academia. I encountered a wide range of different delineations. And what’s more: The way atheists are defined or excluded by definition reveals some interesting aspects about the relationship between religion and nonreligion and about religion in general.

“An atheist, I thought, didn’t believe in a god.”

I want to start with a discussion that took place in a Baptist church in a mid-sized town in central Texas. When I told the interviewees that the interview is about atheists, one of them mentioned the Islamist terror attack against the Boston Marathon that had happened less than a week earlier. Subsequently, the two middle-aged men debated whether Muslims are atheists. While one responded that “Muslims are not atheists,” the other—the one who brought up the terror attack—insisted “Yes, they are!” To that, the first one responded: “They believe in a god, or they claim to.” And the second one said: “Yeah, but not the true God.” Then the discussion went on about believing in “false gods” and “worshipping idols.” In the end, the first one closed with: “An atheist, I thought, didn’t believe in a god.”

This connection of atheism to Islamist terrorism not only shows the negative connotations atheists evoke for some. The discussion between the two actually showed in a nutshell the two most basic types of delineation that frequently occurred in my interviews. The first speaker defined atheism according to the etymological meaning of the term “atheism,” which implies that atheists “didn’t believe in a god.” The second speaker defined an atheist as anyone who would not believe in the same god, the “true God.” For him it doesn’t matter, if people believe in no god or in the wrong god. In such a definition the definiendum—that which is to be defined—equals everyone who differs from the person who defines it.

“All these different ways to trap people”

In its different variations, definitions of the nonreligious as anyone who differs from the true religion is widespread. A frequent version of it was the idea that only “born-again” Christians are “saved.” One example is from a woman, who, together with her husband and others, handed out Christian information material at a weekly fair in a larger city in California. Their stand was located next to an atheist stand that likewise handed out information. Although the two groups
could not be more different in terms of their beliefs, both groups reported to get along “pretty well” with each other. After she had explained in length the concept of being “born-again,” she said in regard to the atheists:

The enemy who led Adam and Eve and all of us to sin, who is the arch enemy of God has given us all these different ways to trap people with different carrots to try to get them away from the narrow way which is Jesus Christ. The only way. And as believers, we know that there can only be one truth. Only one absolute truth. There can’t be many truths. Because truth is truth. […] But see, most man made religions work their way. They either work for their founder or they work for their church, they work their way. They’re trying to be good, thinking that they’re going to get to God that way. Whereas the difference with a born-again believer is: God came down to us because we couldn’t save ourselves.

It is clear that for her the difference is actually not between the atheists and the religious, but between a born-again believer and everybody else. The possibility that atheists do not try “to get to God” is ignored: they are lumped in with all the others who are led astray from the “narrow way” by the devil.

Other ways to distinguish nonbelievers from believers were reminiscent of even older theological disputes, like the question of baptizing children and whether good works are actually required in order to be saved. And, of course, I also encountered Protestant demarcations towards Catholics, insofar as “they’re not taught to have a personal relationship with Christ, they’re taught more to rely on a Priest to give them the answer,” as one women from a Baptist church in a mid-sized town in central Texas specified. However, some Catholics returned the favor. When I asked in a Hispanic Catholic church from a mid-sized town in South Central Texas if the interviewees—who were recruited mainly from the choir—have had experiences with people who do not believe in God, one person brought up “persons who are not Catholic, [who] believe only certain parts of Gods teachings” or “the Protestant brothers.”62 It becomes clear that religious belonging always includes delineations, and that atheists are not the only out-group. To the contrary, for many the religious circle of the we seems to be very small.

62 The interview was conducted in Spanish. The original wording was “personas que no son católicas, ellos solamente creen cierta parte de la enseñanza de Dios,” or “los hermanos protestantes.”
Both “born-again” Christianity as well as Catholicism are relatively widespread in the United States. But the definition of atheists as anyone who doesn’t believes in one’s own particular religion can also be found among religious minorities. A Muslim who was handing out pamphlets in San Diego linked atheism to not believing in Allah. He did not seem to make a difference between atheists and Christians, who represent the majority in the country: “Obviously the people around will be… Most of them are in ignorance, are in unawareness and they will be getting awareness on the Day of Judgment.” Asked more specifically if he thinks that “there are many nonbelievers in American society,” he paused for a bit and then answered:

Islam is one of the fastest religion in the USA, there is no doubt about it. But there are like… In America, the exposure is not that much to the people to reach the truth.

So, obviously for him (similarly to the Christian examples), anyone who is not a Muslim counts as nonbeliever. Asked to which part of Islam he belongs, Sunni or Shia, he responded,

I don’t say anything like that. We belong to the, the Islam was given to the prophet Mohammed. That we would follow the Koran and the teachings of the prophet. So we don’t follow any deviance, or anything the new prophets. And anything they believe other than the Koran, we don’t follow them.

This last sentence demonstrates nicely how an exclusive religious truth claim implies the identification of “deviance,” which he even applies to other adherents of Islam. Apparently, far from exclusively applying to atheism, religion can always be “othering” and create an out-group. It seems to be a basic feature of religious truth claims.

Also theories about identity formation usually point out that identity is created not just through identification but also through “othering.” This dynamic has been debated most prominently in terms of ethnic identity (Hall, Evans and Nixon 2013, Barth 1998) or in regard to the West’s relation to the so called Orient (Said 2003). However, this dynamic of identification and othering seems to be a basic feature of religious identity, too. The studies of religion scholar Gritt Klinkhammer show that even interreligious dialogue is often “boundary work” and that contact with people of other religions can also lead to a strengthening and re-assuring of one’s own religious identity (Klinkhammer 2018, see also Klinkhammer, Klug and Neumaier under review)
“The lukewarm mist”

Delineations do not necessarily follow interreligious, interdenominational or even doctrinal lines. They can also be oriented towards the intensity or earnestness of religious commitment. One trait that I discovered in many interviews with believers was that the formal avowal to a religion is not enough. Many believers do not just expect the outward obedience to religious norms, but actual conviction. I will show that with a couple of examples in which people distance themselves from less committed members of their own religion. Talking about the Christian mainstream in Texas, a young woman from a vibrant nondenominational and Evangelical megachurch in Austin said:

That’s a blessing and a curse on Texas. That’s blessing because it is so common and it’s easy to find a church and it’s easy to find and go to a place of worship and be with people. But, it’s also really easy to become lukewarm in that. And I think that’s where you’ll find a lot of people that get bitter with the churches because it’s like the lukewarm mist turns into just a secular lifestyle. Because it is so common, everyone goes to church and then it becomes lukewarm. And God hates that.

By saying it is easy to become “lukewarm” in an environment where it is easy to exercise one’s religion, implies that more difficult circumstances somehow encourage a more dedicated exercise of one’s faith. The “secular lifestyle” is everywhere and the “lukewarm mist” is responsible for people leaving the churches. Moreover, she gives that ultimate authority by saying that it is also an offense to God, who “hates that.” Here, the line drawn to the secular falls together with the interviewee’s own religious identity.

Theories about the relationship between religion and nonreligion have defined nonreligion in relation towards the dominant religion (Campbell 1971) or towards religion in a general sense (Lee 2012b and Quack 2014). My data shows that on the other side of that relationship—meaning the relation of religion towards nonreligion—believers sometimes draw the line between their own version of their own religion and everybody else. There is only one way to the truth, as is implied in the popular saying “Wide is the path but narrow is the gate.”
“We are all God’s children.”

As another contrast, this gate can be defined relatively broad, too. It even can extend to the case where its no longer important what one believes, as long as one believes. This can come from progressive and alternative forms of religion or from the conservative and the mainstream side. When asked in front of a Walmart in another mid-sized town in South Central Texas if she would “vote for someone who does not believe in God,” a middle-aged woman responded:

I don’t think I would. I really don’t. I really don’t think I would because I… to me, believing in God deals with a person’s conscience and I feel like that if they don’t believe in God, then where’s their conscience? You know? I mean, that’s just the way I feel, you know. So I’d have a hard time voting for someone that just… was an atheist. […] So I mean, they don’t have to believe the same thing that I believe, they don’t have to be… belong to the same church.

Later, she told me that she voted for Trump, who in his anti-Muslim campaigns drove support also from the exclusion of other believers. So, her tolerance for the different “paths” people take seemed to remain within a Christian framework, which is also apparent when she stated that others don’t have to “belong to the same church.” This seems to be rooted in the idea of conscience or—as I will show in my next example—in the perception of similar values.

Here, the interviewee is an active member of a Methodist church in Dallas, who characterized himself as more “on the conservative side,” but through his work in a big international company has several Muslim colleagues, with whom he works in a team. When he was asked if he would see a difference between people who believe in Allah and those who are nonbelievers or atheists, he responded:

Yeah, I would. And this has been, you know… I’ve had a little bit of time to reflect on that. Um… Yes, they’re different. There’s an absolute difference there. One is monotheistic and the other groups are nonbelievers in God. Also: Credit to the Muslims, which some people will refer to them as “Christian cousins”… I don’t know if… I have no disagreement with that, but I haven’t warmed my heart up to that yet, to say ‘cousins.’ I probably could, but I haven’t done it yet, practically speaking. But they, thankfully, thankfully, they have a belief in one God. Which Christians do, too. And they have a
word that they believe come from God that has some very important standards and morals in it that they follow. And it’s… I think it’s helpful for them. It helps them as a people to stay strong in some of those areas.

He then goes on about “family unit” and that Muslims don’t divorce: They have “no secular attitude” towards that. As he finds divorces “very bad,” he strongly appreciates this: “It’s when you’re married, you’re married, and you don’t break out this law by divorcing. So, therefore, they stay together.” The other thing he appreciates is that “they don’t do abortions.”

It would be against God’s will for them to do that. And that’s very helpful because, now they don’t have a lot of missing kids in the world. […] They have lots of kids. And that’s a good thing.

This is a long, considerate answer. He is not just defining atheists as other but also defines commonalities within the religious. So, despite the widespread conservative disdain against the growth of the Muslim population in the country, this self-identified conservative definitely prefers them over atheists because he sees some commonalities in terms of a value-based conservatism.

But this form of differentiation between people of any faith on the one hand and people of no faith on the other also exists in a more progressive version. This is most obvious, of course, in the Interfaith Movement. The following excerpt stems from an interview in an interfaith group in a city in Texas, where I interviewed a Methodist youth minister along with a man, who converted to the Sikh faith, and described himself as honoring “all faiths” and “all scriptures” because “the idea of the creator is too big to be ensconced in any one particular faith.” After discussing the difference between religion and spirituality, the Sikh distinguished himself from the “fundamentalist” view to draw narrow lines about one’s own religion, for example, by defining Protestants or Catholics out of Christianity. Interestingly, the Methodist youth minister then demonstratively stressed several times that even the self-identification as Christian does not matter: “Who cares if it’s Christian?”—to what the Sikh responded: “As long as you and Jesus agree on some level, all is well.” They then both agreed that “We’re all God’s children.” And the Sikh added: “And as long as it’s right with you and with the creator in whatever form you see him or her or it, then all works.” So, they both profess very open-minded versions of faith. However, by saying, “We are all God’s children” and through the requirement that one has to acknowledge
some sort of creator, the rejection of the idea of a creator is excluded from this broad range of legitimate possibilities. This implies a certain relativism about the different religious truth claims—in the case of the male or female creator, even to the extent of binary contradictions—but at the same time upholds the idea of religious truth in general. Apparently, it is not a certain truth claim but rather the process of claiming truth itself that serves an important function here.

Gritt Klinkhammer describes this delineation as a distinct pattern in interfaith dialogues, which can exclude the nonreligious as a third and mark them as deficient (Klinkhammer 2018). With Gerd Baumann, one could call that a “segmentary grammar”—a way of distinguishing the self from the other which “determines identities and alterities according to context” (Baumann 2004:21). While the interfaith people may perceive each other as different in one context, here they perceive themselves as part of the same group through the contrast to a shared other: the nonreligious.63

“Someone to be anti-, opposed to...”

The term “atheism” itself seems to play a crucial role in the delineation. Studies with nonreligious participants have shown that people who self-identify as atheist, agnostic, humanist, or secular experience significantly more discrimination (Cragun et al. 2012). And sociologist Christopher Garneau found that self-identified atheists are more likely to experience subjective discrimination, prejudice, and unfair treatment than other seculars (Garneau, Christopher R. H. 2012:42–49). I indeed found some indications for that. For example, a man from a United Methodist Church in a mid-sized town in South Central Texas describes his encounters with the nonreligious people as follows:

I’ve had an agnostic or two, but not really an atheist, somebody that’s just dead set on that. My default assumption or prejudice there would be that—with America being predominately Christian tradition—that there must have been some type of hurt or something that happened either personally or through a church experience or something that put them that way. I just don’t see if somebody... An agnostic—ok. I know, I don’t

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63 Baumann distinguishes two more grammars: The first one is an “Orientalizing” one, in reference to the work of Edward Said Said (2003). He points out that orientalism is not just good and bad but also a projection of one’s own desires to the other. The third grammar, that of “Encompassment,” will be described in the next part of this chapter.
buy it. But someone to be anti-, opposed to… seems to me there’s probably some event back in their past.

He describes the difference between agnostics and atheists as one in the degree of their certainty but also links the atheist to an opposition to religion. In another interview with a Catholic deacon from Texas, and his son, who explicitly did not believe in God, the latter said: “I would never call myself atheist.” Then he went on to ask his father “What would you say?” And the father responded:

Well, I would… No, I wouldn’t even call you agnostic. Well… Maybe. I guess agnostic is probably the best, because agnostic is, doesn’t believe there is not a God, but they’re not sure there’s a God. And so that would probably be the closest to you.

Here, we can see a strong reservation against the term “atheism”—even from someone who could easily be classified as one—and for the father initially even for the term “agnosticism.”

In other cases agnosticism is also understood in quite unusual terms, for example when two people from Baptist church in a mid-sized in Central Texas agree in that agnosticism meant, “you believe that there’s a God but […] that he’s not interacting.” And as I’ve shown, the term atheism can also be understood in various ways—which does not exclude that it’s predominantly seen as negative. Even a believer in Krishna whom I met at the California coast and who said: “atheists can be really good people,” implied a hierarchy of beliefs, when he went on explaining that those good atheists “do pious activities.”

However, despite reports of atheists who use alternative vocabulary, such as non-theists or not religious, in order to avoid prejudice (Garneau, Christopher R. H. 2012:66), psychologists Lawton Swan and Martin Heesacker found that the bias is not just due to the highly politicized label “atheist,” but also includes people who were described as having “no belief in God.” And in my research, as will show throughout this chapter, I’ve made many observations that would support that.
“He’s not believing in the Buddhists and he’s not believing in any other deity.”

Typically, in my data the divide was framed as atheist versus religious, despite the fact that there are non-theist or polytheist religions. In a Buddhist Temple in California, I interviewed a Buddhist nun who immigrated to the United States from South Korea about a decade earlier. She told me her “personal opinion” about that question:

Buddhism is atheist because we don’t have a God. We don’t have a absolute God. We have a God, but God is a type of a being. Like us, so they are certain beings… heavenly beings, but they are still… they have to still reach the… What is it? Liberation? The Nirvana. They are still in the middle of the pass to the Nirvana. So, we don’t have the absolute God like a Christian God. So, that’s why I’m—personally… Some monk might not… who do not agree with me. But to me… So, I’m atheist too, you know, because I don’t believe it.

That means, as was pointed out by sociologist Lois Lee (2012b), that an opposition between religion and atheism is not always correct. If we want to call Buddhism a religion—and the nun pointed out that she calls it a “philosophy”—then there would also exist religious atheists. However, on the emic level of public discourse this does not play too big a role. Here, the typical delineation is that between atheism and religion. A Baptist woman from a mid-sized town in Central Texas, for example, defines atheists as opposed to religion in general:

What’s funny is that an atheist isn’t just saying that he doesn’t believe in our God, who we believe to be the Holy God of… God of all Gods. He’s not believing in the Muslim God, he’s not believing in the Buddhists and he’s not believing in any other deity of any kind.

That means that a study about the discourse regarding atheism needs to take into account that this form of delineation still is relatively prevalent, no matter if it contradicts our etic differentiations, and no matter if it is “simply illogical and should be dispensed with entirely,” as Lee has put it (Lee 2012b:135).

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64 I want to thank Thomas Tweed for making me aware of that problem.
ANALYZING ANTI-ATHEISM

“I had cold chills ‘cause I’d never heard anyone say that out loud.”

Atheists are often seen as a rare phenomenon. One older lady from a small Baptist church in North West Texas remembers the first time she actually met an atheist:

The first time I ever heard anyone say that they didn’t believe in God— I had heard of people all my life that didn’t believe in God, but... —the first time I ever heard anyone say that they didn’t believe in God, I was in line at Wal-Mart. And a couple of ladies ahead of me was evidently talking to the guy that was checking them out. And he said, “I don’t believe in God and I don’t want hear anything that you have to say about God.” And I had cold chills ‘cause I’d never heard anyone say that out loud.

When she continues, it becomes clear that she is actually aware that “that there’s a lot of people that don’t…” but instead of finishing the sentence, she would quickly come up with her strategy to bring them to believe: “You can pray for ‘em.” What is apparent here is a process of othering that is expressed not just in the reported events themselves—that the topic would be discussed in a line at the register of a shopping center—but also through the shock or the “cold chills” that the interviewee described as her own reaction.

The view that atheists are seldom correspondents with the actual numbers of atheists, which are very small, especially in Texas and the South (Pew Research Center 2015d). Atheism is not visible, and often not a salient identity. Additionally, studies with atheists have shown that people often hide their lack of belief by avoiding the topic (Charles et al. 2012) or by being selective about whom to tell about their unbelief (Foust 2009:36–41). So, no wonder that many people believe that they have “never met an atheist.” It is absolutely conceivable that they did not knowingly meet one or have never talked with an atheist about their atheism. One man from a Pentecostal church in a mid-sized town in South Central Texas puts it:

I don’t know that I’ve ever really met someone personally. […] But […] I can honestly say, I’ve never gone toe to toe with an atheist where they’ve gone back and forth ‘Why do you believe this?’ or whatever.

A female interviewee from the same church says that while she might “know people that don’t specifically go to church on a regular basis” that cannot be equated with being a “nonbeliever.”
And she doesn’t “know anyone specifically that’s gone that far.” Being a nonbeliever obviously is marked here as an extreme position.

Paradoxically, while atheists and agnostics count as extreme positions and extreme exceptions, the secular is often seen as “mainstream” or the “normal.” When asked what comes to her mind when she hears “the word secular,” a young woman from another Pentecostal church in a mid-sized town in South central Texas answered: “Kind of mainstream. Like pop culture. [...] I think of, you know, hip...” Such a distance to the mainstream often entails a rather pessimistic, anti-modern critique of today’s society. Among a group of older Catholics from West Texas, I was told by a man:

> In some ways with today’s society, it is easier not to believe than to believe because the prevailing trend in the literature, news, whatever it is, it’s against religion. They’re more willing to point out the bad parts of religion rather than the good. So it’s not a natural that so many people are turning away from religion. Because, like I said, it’s easier not to believe than it is to believe. It’s much harder for us to defend our faith in our daily life than it is to simply go with the flow and not participate.

Here, present day society is not just characterized through its secularity but also through an activism “against religion.” Under such conditions, where “it is easier not to believe than to believe,” religious belief becomes especially commendable. The contradiction that exists for the Christian prevalence in America is often reconciled through a delineation between religion and nonreligion that accepts only their own definition of the righteous faith. Or as one older male from another small Baptist church in North East Texas has put it:

> I think the majority the world or the United States, they believe in God. But that’s, that’s where it stops. [...] They don’t have that daily relationship with God.

So, in regard to the line that is drawn between the believer and the atheist, my research showed that the definitions of atheism are varied on the emic level. While some of the religious use a definition close to the lexical meaning of the term, others use it as a marker for everyone who does not believe in their own god or differs from their own religion. If nonreligion and atheism are defined rather broad, that can include other religions but also other varieties of the own religion. It is even applied to people to whom believers ascribe take their religion less seriously.
On the other hand, there also exist delineations in which all religions are included in the in-group qua being religions. For this interreligiousness the atheist becomes the ultimate outsider, the *other* that is needed to define the commonalities of the *own*. Together, the distinction towards the mainstream—towards the less religious—and towards the atheist even in a very tolerant and open-minded setting, shows that, in words of Klinkhammer, religion is always “boundary work.”

### Denying the Denier—To Explain Them Away

In the psychology and sociology of religion, attitudes towards atheists are sometimes described as intergroup bias, meaning in-group favoritism and out-group derogation. Studies by psychologists from Baylor University, for example, have shown that people who report higher levels of religion and spirituality show more negative attitudes towards atheists and that when people were primed with religious terms, they reacted more negatively towards atheists than with a neutral prime (Johnson, Rowatt and LaBouff 2012). However, those quantitative studies overlook maybe the most surprising finding of my analysis: the denial of atheists’ existence. Here, an out-group is not even considered real. In the following part, I therefore will present some examples of this denial from my data and discuss some potential explanations.

“I don’t think there’s no such thing.”

An intriguing contrast to the cases from rural Texas, where people think that may have never met an atheist and even might be right about that, are the reports of people that do not believe that there is such a thing as an atheist at all. Interestingly, this pattern was most pronounced in the liberal Bay Area and other parts of California, where there is actually quite a big population of atheists (Pew Research Center 2015c). For many, it is incomprehensible that people do not believe in a higher power. A male interviewee from the aforementioned Christian information stand on the California fair, after describing that atheists do not believe in an afterlife, expressed his doubt that they really are convinced of that: “I don’t believe it for a second. Even when I was an atheist, I really didn’t believe that, so… ” It is interesting, that he would call himself a former atheist, despite the fact that he did not believe that there is no afterlife, while at the same time describing this as the key characteristic of atheism. He creates an argumentative circle in which the possibility of actual atheism is ruled out and in which any contradictions are eradicated because his own memory serves as proof.
Similarly, a middle aged female with a family background in the Philippines who lives in San Francisco says that she herself “was born Catholic and raised Catholic,” still practices, but does not “believe in everything they teach.” When I asked her about atheists, she says:

I think a lot of people, if they don’t believe in God they believe in something supernatural that helps them live their life to the fullest and be a good person. So, it doesn’t really matter if they believe in God. I don’t know what their belief is but it’s just… I think there’s one thing that they believe in, which is similar to what we believe in, like God. I don’t really have any negative comments about those people.

Of course, I did not ask for “negative comments.” I asked, “what do you think about people who don’t believe in God or who are atheists?” That she adds that, as if I was asking for negative things, shows something about the overall societal perceptions of atheists, in which it would be socially desired to comment adversely on them. However, particularly in California there also exists the societal expectation of non-discrimination of minorities. Not acknowledging them as such may be a way of aligning those two contradicting requirements. On the one hand, she clearly distances herself from any discrimination or “negative comment” as she called it. But at the same time, she does not fully acknowledge that those people even exist. When I asked her more specifically about people who “don’t believe in any supernatural at all” she responded:

I don’t know if there’s people like that. Because I know someone, they don’t believe in God but they still believe in something, so I don’t know if… Yeah, I don’t know about that, you know… what you call them, atheists maybe, but I think they still believe in something supernatural.

This personal doubt about other people’s atheism can even translate into allegations of lying, as in the case of a man from a Baptist church in a mid-sized town in Central Texas. He told me: “I don’t believe in atheists,” and then brought up a story from motivational speaker Zig Ziglar, in which people had to do a polygraph test in order to get hired. Among other things they were asked if they believe in God. But whenever

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65 Many thanks to Anna Neumaier for pointing that out to me.

66 The story can be found in Ziglar (2004:153), which also shows that this pattern seems to be popular in the United States’ popular discourse.
somebody said ‘no,’ he said, the needle would tell them different. So they would be lying about that. So, I don’t think… I don’t think anybody… I don’t really believe in atheism unless the person has a mental disability ‘cause I think that we’re all born with that in our being, in our soul, in our minds that there is a God.

Here, atheists are either accused of lying or pathologized. He even goes further by saying:

I do know people that declare to be an atheist. But personally, I don’t really believe that a person is an atheist. I don’t think there’s no such thing. There’s people that say they are, but I don’t believe they are. Unless, like I say… they’re mentally disturbed.67

His assumption is that people are born religious, that belief is innate, and that the only potential reason for atheism is mental disability. The possibility that someone does not believe in a supernatural power on the base of an informed or rational decision is ruled out.

“People pissed at God”

In further variations of the denial pattern, several explanations are found for why people don’t believe, many of which have in common that they avoid the cognitive side of the choice not to believe but find other explanations for the inexplicable. One of them is to imagine a tragedy through which people must have lost their faith. A man from a small Baptist church in a North East Texas told me: “Whenever I meet someone that claims to be an atheist […] There’s always a defining moment in their life that makes them believe that there’s not.” The attribution of atheism, or the “claim” of atheism, to a biographical tragedy often moves on to the idea that people are “angry at God.” The Methodist from the interfaith group, whom we met earlier:

If I was to talk about believers and nonbelievers, it quickly becomes the discussion of people pissed at God and people that are not pissed at God.

This, again, presents an argumentative circle in which the possibility that people really do not believe in God is ruled out because in order to be “pissed at God,” one would have to believe in him.

67 For the non-American reader: “I don’t think there’s no such thing,” is a double negative expression, which is used in informal American English equivalent to “I don’t think there’s any such thing.”
“There are no atheists in the foxhole.”

Another form of that pattern is that atheists have not been tested enough, but would find God in crisis. It corresponds with the popular saying that “There are no atheists in foxholes,” which was frequently evoked by my interview partners: A Baptist woman from a mid-sized town in Central Texas (19) said:

I was saying that there are no atheists in the foxhole. [...] You stick a gun to their head and they’re going to pray to somebody real quick.

The passage is followed by laughter in the whole group. Later she goes on to say: “I think we’re all born knowing there’s a supreme being, there’s a God.” And her friend seconded: “I think that’s in the Bible.”

The belief that one will find God as soon as one is tested is not an exclusively Christian one: The Sikh from the Interfaith meeting explained to me:

I would say that the people who do not believe, they have not been tested enough in their life to go beyond the intellectual mind. When you’re put in a life and death situation of any sort, you find out very quickly who you really are. And I have yet to ever find someone who went through one of those and did not end up suddenly believing in a higher power.

It is implied, that belief in a higher power would be the inevitable result of confrontation with a very scary situation.68 Here, instead of denying the rationality of the choice not to believe, he acknowledges but devalues it: When it comes to things that really matter, one has to “go beyond the intellectual mind.”

This can even take the form of acknowledging atheism as a choice or “decision”—as volition is frequently described as a Christian principle—while conversely calling the atheist the denier:

68 That, by the way, corresponds with a number of conversion stories, where people have found to religion when they “rock bottom.” That indicates that believers may generalize from their own experience here.
An atheist believes in not believing and that’s a decision they made, not to believe. But what they’re doing is… They’re actually living in denial. […] Actually, they’re in denial, because if they can deny there’s a heaven or hell, then they can live any way they want to and not worry; but when Judgment Day comes, then they have to pay the price.

"Because they’ve been hurt"

Yet another form of the denial pattern is to shift the responsibility for people’s atheism from the atheists themselves to the Christians, who either have not introduced Christianity to the atheists or have hurt them and subsequently scared them away from the churches to which they would otherwise belong. Both can be found in the next quote from a young woman, whom I met at a nondenominational religious event on the campus of a large public university in Texas:

We definitely make mistakes and people end up getting hurt because of that. And so, I’ve got some friends that are kind of in the fall out from that. So, I think of some anger and some pain there. But I also have people, I also have friends that aren’t familiar with Christianity at all.

In addition, the Sikh from the Interfaith group said, “When you have a chance to learn actual meditation and experience your own spirit within”—in other words, when you have been sufficiently exposed to his religious truth—“there’s no way you can not believe.” But while really not everyone has access to “actual meditation,” the idea that someone in the United States is not “familiar with Christianity at all” is constructing a very unlikely scenario. The second explanation, that people may have been excluded from churches, is more likely and very common. Another young woman in the same interview told me:

I had a bunch of nonreligious friends and they always had a very sag view of the church because they’ve been hurt. They’ve been thrown out because of sexuality or just different things had happened. And so, while I fully believe these people had a relationship with God at some point they just wandered away. And it’s for me… it’s always been kind of hard. It’s like you believe in this stuff, but you’re pretending it’s not there.

And a student at the same event said he thinks that some “are agnostic and atheist only because they see how some Christians can be so hypocritical.” The idea that atheists just don’t find the
idea of a god convincing is ruled out again. Apparently, believers rather engage in self-criticism than to consider the atheist argument. So, in all these variations I found a tendency to deny either that atheists exist at all or that their nonbelief is a conscious decision. Their atheism is accredited to being “hurt,” to being “pissed at God,” or to a “mental disability.” In some cases, they are even accused of “lying” or “pretending.” That is often based in the idea that religion is innate, that humans are born believers.

Such an approach to include even atheists in the circle of the religious, no matter what they say, could be described with religion scholar Gerd Baumann as a grammar of “encompassment,” which refers to “an act of selfing by appropriating” in which others are included in the in-group, despite the fact that they themselves state a difference (Baumann 2004:25). However, such a structural description does not provide a causal explanation. For that, an approach that includes socio-psychological factors might be more instructive (Klinkhammer 2018). The “encompassment” through the statement that there cannot be people who do not believe in God or a higher power is reminiscent of a defense mechanism known in psychoanalysis as “disavowal” (Verleugnung)—a term used by Freud for a defensive measure in which the subject refuses to recognize the reality of a shocking perception (Laplanche and Pontalis 2006:118–121). In the case of the disavowal of atheists’ existence, the scary observation that needs to be somehow repressed is not the discovery of the sexual difference, but that of the religious difference. Contrary to the religious nonconformist, which presents only a gradual difference or alternative to the dominant religion, and which can be integrated to a certain extent in the American civil religion or at least religion in general, atheism questions the belief in a higher power as such. People, who don’t believe that there is a God or even believe that there is no God pose the ultimate challenge to the theist concept and hence need to be disavowed. That is underlined through the contradicting ways to reach that goal. Whether atheists are denied their rational thought because they must be “mentally disturbed” or if “they have not been tested enough in their life to go beyond the intellectual mind”—both paths lead to disavowal.

69 It also could be described as a “foreclosure” (foreclusion) in the sense of Jaques Lacan (see Laplanche and Pontalis (2006:166–169)).
“Never have I heard an atheist say, ‘Well, I used to believe in God.’”

In order to test this hypothesis I want to introduce someone for whom outright denial is not an option because she knows an atheist very well. A Baptist woman from a mid-sized town in Central Texas tells me that she is very good friends with an atheist who “would lay his life down” in order to protect her and her family. When one of the teenagers in the interview group told the story of—and her disappointment about—people booing when an instructor at a Christian camp played an atheist, the women said about the kids who booed: “That’s an example of them hearing or seeing ‘atheist’ and they automatically become defensive because that’s their natural sinful desire; to defend…” Then she goes on to tell me:

When I consider my atheist friends, I recognize that sometime in our adult life, somewhere between our mid-teens into our college years and maybe a little beyond… those people began to sit back and rationalize. ‘What’s right? Who’s right?’ [...] And at some point it becomes so hard that they rationalize that ‘Y’all, there doesn’t have to be anything.’—their own rationalization… And I think that… For me when I hear ‘atheist,’ I’d love to sit down with them any day. Just because I love to hear what got them there.

She excuses the children’s reaction “to defend” as natural, but at the same time calls it “sinful desire.” Her position is not one of distance but rather of demonstrative intellectual curiosity. She recounts a typical atheist argument. However, instead of bringing up a counter-argument, she immediately adds her own form of denial:

Never have I heard an atheist say, ‘Well, I used to believe in God. I used to believe in God Almighty.’ Now, I’ve heard them say, ‘I was once a Muslim.’ Or ‘I used to believe…’ you know, some very interesting concepts out there. [...] But the point being, I’ve never heard anybody say, ‘I used to believe Jesus was a real man and that He was the Son of God. But then one day, I started thinking, probably not.’ Nobody ever says that. Nobody ever says… Because once they begin to open up and investigate what’s there, the evidence that’s there… that’s there in our history, in our artifacts, even an atheist can’t deny that Jesus Christ, Jesus the man of Nazareth who walked on this… was the greatest teacher and philosopher ever. Ever. Amongst… If they say that He wasn’t the greatest, they’re gonna put him in the top five. I mean, He... His teachings were insanely
prominent in that time and have affected our world in ways that no one else can even comprehend.

She does not generally deny that atheists exist. Her version of disavowal is that people who are atheists could not have been believers in Christ before—a variation of the pattern that nonbelievers are just not familiar enough with Christianity. However, during the course of her argument she seems to become less secure about it. When she comes to the point of “evidence,” she shifts the level of her argument from her own religious truth to the historical existence of Jesus and the validity and impact of his philosophy—something that is not generally contested among atheists, but is not equivalent to believing in a higher power or even believe that Jesus “was the Son of God.” That again shows a certain familiarity with the arguments of the atheists.

Coming back to the example of the Christian camp, where the kids booed at the atheist figure, she continues:

That was a great example because you hear the word ‘atheist’ and you wanna put up your dukes. But usually people who are atheist are just rejecting. They just haven’t found what they can accept in their heart as what the truth could be. I really, really genuinely believe that. So yeah. I like atheists. I like to hear them.

We find again, that atheists “are just rejecting.” But she even adds a new form of denial: That atheists “haven’t found” their truth yet. The wording “what they can accept in their heart as what the truth could be” actually acknowledges that people accept different things as truth. Only the atheists’ truth is not valid. They “haven’t found” it. So, although I picked a contrasting case, the pattern of denial or disavowal still can be found to a certain extent. Although—or because—she seems to know, to like, and to enjoy atheists, their arguments must be devalued.

Interestingly, her demonstrative openness swings back in the opposite direction rather heavily the moment she speaks about atheists being a notable part of society.

Then the mother in me, I do wanna tell you, the momma in me, the defensive one in me… Where I begin defensive is this—and here in America specifically—when you use your atheism to take away my rights, to take away what this country was founded on. ‘Cause this country was very much founded on Christian principle. Was very much founded on what this Bible says. It used to be taught in our schools and I don’t mean like
let’s learn about Jesus today and what part of Galilee… I mean like a) For all have sinned and come short of the glory… . b) Because He first loved me… It’s how we taught, indoctrinated our entire country. So my point is just that, if your lack of belief can take things from me then it shouldn’t be able to impose them on my kids now.

She explains at which point she gets “defensive”—here, apparently, not seeing defensiveness as the “sinful desire” she described it as in the case of the kids in the Christian camp, but as her prerogative. She evokes the frequent formula of America being “founded on Christian principle,” something that she imagines as being part of her “rights.” That includes a literalistic belief—not a modernized one, or one based on the historical Jesus—which is taught in schools. She even calls that an indoctrination. Subsequently she told me that the school prayer, she used to say as a kid, today, would be replaced by a moment of silence, “because some atheist somewhere got their way with the whole ‘get God out of school.’” She wants Christians to “fight harder,” because she finds that “anti-American.”

Shortly after, she gives a hint to where her fears might come from:

When I’m talking with an atheist, ultimately we can sit and we can argue all day. We can both Google our own research and we can both come up with some very valid arguments. […] If the atheist is right… we’ve lost nothing. We’ve lived our lives, we had some great discussions, we died, we got buried in the ground and… we’ve lost nothing. […] If I’m right though, if there was something more, if there is something more, if this is a living word and there’s a living God that’s represented here and we die, then I have nothing to lose and everything to gain. The atheist on the other hand, has everything to lose.

She herself has used the term “rationalization” for the atheist view. However, one also could describe hers as such. Rationalization is a “Procedure whereby the subject attempts to present an explanation that is either logically consistent or ethically acceptable for attitudes, actions, ideas, feelings, etc., whose true motives are not perceived (Laplanche and Pontalis 2006:375–376). While she does not seem to be too sure about her arguments, which she would have to back up through an internet search, the risk that arises from the religious thought of hell and damnation makes believing in God the safer option.
From there she then feels free to move back on the path of religious truth, including the Bible: “It’s the Scripture that tells us that we’re born with an inherent desire to seek out something.” Furthermore, she explains the existence of atheists with the assertion that “they’re being taught.”

You don’t find any born atheist walking around. I’m telling you; if you find little kids who are atheist walking around it’s because they’re hearing it. They’re being taught it.

So, on the one hand she describes the lack of belief as a result of teaching—which adds just another variety of denial. On the other hand, she is apparently aware that Christianity is taught—even “indoctrinated”—in schools. But instead of drawing the conclusion that also her belief might just have been a result of teaching, she clings to her literalistic truth. The reason, why she stays with her belief seems to lie not so much in the better arguments—in the “intellectual what ifs”—but in the reward and punishment-structure that her faith implies. For religion to introduce the mere option of eternal damnation under the lack of absolute certainty makes it risky not to believe. And it is the argument of the atheist that puts her in that risk: The atheist “has everything to lose.” So, consequently she does not answer to the atheist argument but to the threat that comes to her through that argument. And the more she feels exposed, the more she feels the threat. That leads to her defensiveness, rejection, and denial.

This rationalization of belief as \textit{better saved than sorry} was quite frequently encountered, even among people who were very active in religious matters: The Catholic deacon with the atheist son said for example:

Maybe there is a God, maybe there isn’t. Maybe there is an afterlife, maybe there isn’t. Maybe, is there heaven and hell? Maybe there isn’t. Are you willing to risk your eternal soul, are you willing to risk being in hell, if there is eternal life, or, you know? That’s really what you have to ask yourself.

And a man from the megachurch in California: “So, I’ll believe and take my chances that way rather than say, ‘No’ and be sorry later.” Obviously, both interviewees are far from certain about the existence of an afterlife, heaven and hell. They openly express that it is the “risk” that the mere option poses, that brings them to choose religion over nonreligion.

These cases show that there seems to be more to the rejection of atheists than an intergroup bias, because in many cases atheists are not even believed to exist. Where people are confronted with
atheists nevertheless, for many believers the only way to deal with that is to question their mental ability or honesty in regard to themselves. Another way is to take away the responsibility from the atheists themselves and blame it on some tragedy in their past, or even on the believers who have hurt atheists or scared them away from the churches. All those arguments are a disavowal (Laplanche and Pontalis 2006:118–121) of atheists that helps to deny the potentially threatening discovery that there may not be a god. Where atheism actually is acknowledged as a rational decision, in turn this rationality is questioned. So, one way or the other, believers avoid to consciously deal with the question that atheism poses to their faith. In some cases, the denial may makes it easier to retain the norm of non-discrimination, because one can encompass them in the own group. In turn, where the denial fails because atheists become visible as a societal group, which is demanding its rights, that leads to hostile reactions.

**Living After Life—The Fear of Hell and the Risk of Doubt**

If we look at studies that deal with the question of who is particularly anti-atheist in opinion, there seem to be significant differences among denominations. Back in 1966, sociologists Charles Glock and Rodney Stark found that discrimination against atheists was highest among Southern Baptists, and what the researchers classified as members of “sects” (Glock and Stark 1966:88). In 1976, sociologist Erik Filsinger compared toleration towards atheists among different religious groups. From the researched groups, Nones were the most accepting, followed by Jews and Catholics, with Protestants the least accepting. Church attendance was positively correlated to intolerance of nonbelievers (Filsinger 1976:238). Data from the *American Mosaic Project* also reflects these earlier findings that church attendance and conservative Protestantism are positively correlated with anti-atheist bias. They also indicate that other factors are correlated to the acceptance of atheists, like living in a diverse community and cultural variables, but the most significant factors remain closely connected to one’s own religious beliefs and opinions about the role religion should play in society (Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann 2006:220–227). However, those quantitative studies can tell us little about the reasons for anti-atheism. Therefore, in the following I will explore some potential explanations for the rejection of atheists.

> “You have to understand each doctrine and believe every piece of it.”

Adorno stressed the connection between the deprivation of religion of its “intrinsic claim of truth” and the hostile maintenance of its authority. While religion in its true or positive form,
“experienced” belief, could lead to the reduction of prejudice, religion transformed “into an agency of social conformity” and applied as a “mere formulae” can also lead to rigidity and intolerance towards disbelievers and Jews. It is quite difficult to determine what can count as “experienced” belief, but Adorno pointed out that particularly the “dissection” of religion and its submission to “selection and adaptation” is related to authoritarianism and prejudiced views (Adorno et al.:727–731).

However, I found that also insisting on the indivisibility of religion was rather typical for authoritarian views. To give just one example, from a middle aged male Methodist from small Texas city: He criticizes the habit of picking certain aspects of religion. After comparing it to “math,” where “you got to follow a certain order of operations,” he continues:

Same with religions or beliefs. If you want to understand Christianity to its fullest then you have to understand each doctrine and believe every piece of it, every word that the Bible says, where you ca-… If you said there is a will, you know, I believe that God died for our sins, but we’re all gonna be reincarnated, you just made it confusing. […] You’re confusing the doctrines up and you’re making it difficult to fully stand firm in your faith and what you believe in. ‘Cause if you don’t stand firm in something you don’t stand firm in anything.

Here it is exactly the wholeness and indivisibility of faith that becomes the “mere formulae,” which Adorno pointed to. As the interviewee mentioned California earlier, I asked him about the differences between Texas and California. He immediately brought up gun ownership in Texas and “that some of the craziest people have come to California.” When I asked him, if he thinks that this “relates to religion anyhow,” he answered: “I believe it does. I mean again that goes back to standing firm in your faith, or what your beliefs are.” So, for him the firmness—or in other words the rigidity—is a means itself, be it applied to math, to guns or to religion. He then comes back to selectivity in matters of religion:

In California […] there’s individuals they go out there and pick and choose and then say, they want to believe this part of Christianity and this part of Buddhism and this part of agnostic… They just wanna pick and choose. Universalism, everything. They just gather it all together and try to bind it into one big book.
He goes on to explain that these people “will be confused. It’s not gonna hold up.” But another reason for his critique is that eclecticism reduces conformity, as expressed through the idea that faith must be followed also by others. However, his insistence on truth—or at least its appearance—has nothing to do with a personal choice or understanding:

You’re not just born with the knowledge of everything off the bat. You have to learn what’s right and wrong in certain aspects, because there isn’t gray areas. […] That’s a good purpose of having a solid belief system, like Christianity, where you’re just getting taught what’s right and wrong. So you’re gonna live your life and you live your life with more fulfillment when you know what right and wrong is. ‘Cause there’s consequences to your actions.

He exposes a rigid distinction between “right and wrong,” by fault ruling out the possibility of “gray areas.” Such a distinction has to be installed and religion is of use here. That reduces the purpose of belief to an instrument of morality, and even makes the “fulfillment” one experiences in this life a result of that installation, because it is bound to the “consequences to your actions.” So, the insistence on the indivisibility of religious truth does by no means exclude rigidity or authoritarianism. To the contrary, it can be a crucial aspect of it.

“If you deny it, well, here’s what you’ve asked for.”

Adorno gives as an example a belief in God but a disbelief in immortality. In this dissection “the abstract idea of God is accepted as an expansion of the father idea,” whereas “the hope for the individual [as] expressed by the dogma of immortality” is opposed. “Subjects with this point of view want a God to exist as the absolute authority to which they can bow, but they wish the individual to perish completely. The concept of God underlying this way of thinking is that of the absolute essence of punitiveness.” (Adorno et al.:736–737)

However, in my data I found plenty of examples, in which the belief in immortality is the precondition for such an authoritarian and punitive version of God—because the idea of an after-life theologically often includes not just the promise of paradise but also the risk of damnation.

The punishing God is usually associated with the Old Testament and Judaism, but the idea also exists among other religions, for example, in a young Christian who came to an interview, which
I conducted with an atheist Sikh and a Christian, who has befriended him in order to show him “God’s love.” When the Sikh said that it doesn’t make sense for him that “we were born in sin, like in the sense that God sent us to Earth just to believe in a certain religion,” the young Christian answered:

The whole reason all this sin stuff happened is because we decided to sin. He never said, ‘Sin, so I can punish you!’ You know? It was never that. The wages of sin is death but He decided that, ‘I’m going to give you this. I’m going to save you anyway.’ […] He just wanted to save us, He wanted to show His love. That was the only purpose, not to punish us.

In this answer, the young man says that sin is retributed with death, but that God “wanted to save us” anyway. He explicitly negates a view of a God who would want to punish, and instead stresses “His love.” But then he continues to exempt the “sinners” and those who “deny” from that:

If He could condone saving a sinner, I bet He would but it’s not, it’s not possible because it’s His law. It’s Him; He is the law; He is His word. If He were to not punish sinners, then He wouldn’t in a sense be God, and that’s like… It’s His nature. So that’s why He does punish them. He just obliterates them to a certain point. He gives them what they ask for. He says, ‘I’m going to save you, just do this.’ If you deny it, well, here’s what you’ve asked for. You asked to not exist. You’ve asked to not be loved.

Apparently, for him, the idea of God without the “law,” which requires punishment, is not possible. God would not punish, if He could, but even He is bound to this law; “He is the law.” While that comes with a sort of compassion in the beginning, it evolves into a hostile, punitive thought in the course of his argument. If they deny, obliteration through God, is “what they ask for.”

The Muslim respondent from California drives that obsession with punishment and law even further: He describes how “God is watching” him all the time, how Allah knows everything he is thinking and doing, and that he cannot hide from Him like he can hide from human beings. He then abruptly switches from his idea about God’s watching to the ample possibilities for punishment that only God has because the “soul is not going to die.”
A person kill a thousand people, what maximum punishment you can give? One. He’ll be dead. But his thousand victims is equal to one victim here? No. There is a difference, so the only way you justify if the God is there and the punishment is there is in the heavens and the hell. Because in there if you kill thousands, a thousand people, he will be punished a thousand times. He will be burned because his soul is not going to die, his body is going to go through all of those punishments. How many times he want he can repeat it. It’s like a rotation. You can do that. Anybody who does not believe in God, they cannot be good to the society.

Later he tells me that men are on earth only in order to prove their obedience. “This life is a test, as we will be judged on the Day of Judgement if we followed the commands of God or not.” People then “will be sent to the heavens or the hell fire”—the latter of which is hot like the sun. God “can do anything he wants.” It seems that here immortality, and therefore the endless power of God, is related to the personal detachment from the fate of the unbelievers or—even worse—the vivid imagination of the endless punishments that await them. So, obviously it is neither the indivisibility of faith nor the idea of immortality as such that make for a non-punitive and accepting belief when it comes to the unbeliever. Both can stand for the opposite, a fascination for authority and punishment.

“Believe in what you believe.”

As an alternative explanation, I want to introduce what Universalist hospital chaplain Robert L. Rafford calls “atheophobia” as an alternative explanation. According to Rafford, atheophobia is a pathological state that is “unconscious, internalized, and taught from early years on.” It is “learned primarily from one’s parents, but is supported by society and leaders from all institutions: political, ecclesiastical, business, industrial, and social.” He points out that atheophobia is not universal in believers, but is particularly apparent in those “whose postures rest on a bedrock of fear and doubt.” Rafford also indicates that he often observed atheophobia among people that could be described as atheists, but fear that description as well as the consequences of not believing (Rafford 1987:33–34). I tested that with the example of a Hispanic teenager whom I met at a Texas protest against Trump, where he sat on the sidelines waiting for a relative. When I asked him what he thought about the relationship between “religious and
nonreligious people,” he answered quite tolerant without immediately identifying with one of the two:

I think that no matter how you are, ethnicity, religion or culture, I guess you’re unique and I don’t think you should change your culture or anything […] just to be like accepted by society, I guess.

Apparently, the part of being “accepted by society” reminded him of the norms he himself is facing and he added:

I’m not religious, but I do believe in Roman Catholic religion, and I think it’s due to my culture. My family is Catholic. I guess I should be Catholic, too. I mean, I’m not saying that I’m being Catholic just because they are. I mean, I do also think that if you have a something that identifies you, like: Be someone. Be yourself. Believe in what you believe, and… yeah… And I think religion is what somehow guides people because like, I don’t know, I mean… Religion is, I guess based in culture and that what makes you who you are.

He was very hesitant in his response. His answers show some confusion and oscillate between not being “religious” and believing the “Catholic religion,” ascribing the latter to the outward norm that he should have the same religion as his family. For him, religion seems to provide some sort of guidance, but he binds that back to culture, which for him is part of building an identity: it “makes you who you are.” When I asked him if he believes in God, he answered:

I do. I mean, I don’t know about… I do believe in Him but I don’t quite understand how He is or who He is because I guess people sometimes say that God is in everyone or in everything. And I don’t quite understand that, but I do… I do believe in Him.

So, he affirms his belief in God, but then reveals that he does not have a real idea about Him. From the “people [who] sometimes say that God is in everyone or in everything” one can tell that beside the Catholicism of his family, he is subjected to different religious teachings including relatively open ones. That leads to a slight confusion, which he readily admits. He did not seem to see that as a threat though. He values knowing different kinds of view. When I asked him about a street preacher who was preaching near the protest and expressed very extreme religious views about the submission of women and the dangers of homosexuality, the boy defended his
“freedom of speech [...] as long as he doesn’t harm anybody.” He also admitted that he did not pay attention to what the man actually had said and added:

I don’t want to make an opinion about something I don’t have like knowledge about. And I mean, it’s good to have like… to have various opinions, because like, I guess it makes you understand like different topics on different points of view.

Throughout the whole interview, he showed tolerance for any out-group that came up but also kept a strong sense of individuality: “You are who you want to be.” So, despite having doubts and confusion about God, he was not at all defensive against atheists or any other out-group. Instead, he strongly valued different points of view and respected people’s choice about matters of their religion and sexuality.

So, despite the fact that he had doubts about the nature of God, he retains a strong sense for tolerance and individuality. He seems to turn his doubt into an inquiring attitude when he values to learn about different perspectives, or even into an agnostic kind of thinking when he makes no judgement where he might have insufficient information. That means that doubt alone can also lead to interest and acceptance.

*The atheist “has everything to lose.”*

If we compare that to some of the other interview partners who we met earlier, it becomes clear where the difference is: as opposed to the lady with the atheist friends, who also seemed not too sure about her god but rationalizes that if there is a god, the atheist “has everything to lose,” or the Muslim who thinks that all will be “judged” and “sent to the heavens or the hell fire,” or the man who thinks “if they can deny there’s a heaven or hell, [...] when Judgment Day comes, then they have to pay the price,” our teenager shows no sign of fear related to the failure to believe. He did not bring up hell or judgement. So, it is apparently not doubt per se that turns people into anti-atheists or atheophobes, but doubt resulting in fear. And that seems to be related to teachings of hell and judgement.

Of course, like atheophobia itself, ideas about hell and afterlife-punishment are not universal. Many believers have not brought up hell at all. Others discussed if there are “degrees of hell,” or if it is going to “be hot, because this is what Scripture says.” And further, the idea of hell can also
lead to compassion and mission, as in the case of born-again Christian at the California fair, who
describes that unbelievers are “lost” and that he tries to save them by handing out Christian
information:

If I didn’t believe in hell it wouldn’t matter, right? Because it can, you know… Eat, drink
and be merry and tomorrow you die and then that’s it. So, what? But, we believe there
really is a literal hell and that people who reject Jesus Christ will unfortunately go there.

Furthermore, the concept of hell varies tremendously among religions, denominations, and
individual believers. Some have a far softer idea about it, like the Catholic deacon with the atheist
son, who said that:

Sometimes, in the Christian faith, we hear hell as being this place of fire and brimstone
and all that, and it may be that. But in reality, hell is just total separation from God.

Interestingly, he acknowledges the concept of “fire and brimstone” as existing among believers,
and cannot rule it out completely. But then does that nevertheless, by saying that “in reality”
hell—where also his son may end up—is not as bad as some others imagine.

Notwithstanding those relativizations, the idea of eternal reward or punishment and the
dichotomist distinction between heaven and hell is in itself a rigid, authoritarian concept. I would
stress that it is also the idea of omnipotence, and the related authority that allows for the
perpetuation of authoritarian and rigid forms of religious belief. So my examples suggest that
doubt is an important reason for rejecting atheists, particularly where atheism cannot be
explained away, for instance because atheists demand their rights. But doubt does not necessarily
lead to the rejection of atheists. It can also lead to the valuation of perceptivity and discussion.
However, such an open inquiry seems to be bound to the absence of fear. Therefore, a theology
that threatens doubters will eternal damnation certainly adds to a rigid distinction between right
and wrong, as well as to a defensiveness against those who question. So, what Rafford defined as
“fear or hatred of atheism and atheists,” (Rafford 1987:33–34) might actually be rooted more
deeply in a fear of hell and damnation, of which the atheist reminds one.

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70 Whether ascribing those punitive phantasies to God might add to religious violence or deter it, cannot
be determined here, but it certainly adds to the fear that is caused by doubt and, therefore, to the
defensiveness against atheists.
Believing in the Power of a Higher Power—Authoritarianism

There exists an elaborate discussion about the relationship between religion, prejudice and authoritarianism.\(^{71}\) The major irritation is described by psychologist Gordon Allport as the “paradoxical situation” that religion “makes” and “unmakes” prejudice (Allport 1966:447). However, the potential reasons for that are debated controversially without ultimate conclusion. In the following part, I will introduce some theories about the relationship between religion and authoritarianism and subsequently explore what my data can add to this discussion.

“Absolute truth,” “Satanic influence,” and “Good” or “Evil”

Allport observed that—although religions preach compassion and love and although there exist many religious figures that were agents of brotherhood and peace—many empirical studies show that churchgoers are more prejudiced than non-churchgoers. He states that this is a not a linear relationship, though. While prejudice is high among intermediate attenders, who are extrinsically motivated and who attend church for social reasons, prejudice is low among those who attend church very often and show “intrinsic” motivation. Allport considers a number of theological explanations like the idea of revelation, which leads to exclusive truth claims, the doctrine of election, which aids persecution and cruelty against infidels, and theocratic models, which allow for a direct translation of those doctrines into sanctions. He also considers sociocultural reasons. Religion is a conservative agent, and often lends itself to ethnocentrism. But he sees the key to explaining the paradox in psychological terms: Religion does not instill prejudice. “It is rather that a large number of people, by virtue of their psychological make-up, require for their economy of living both, prejudice and religion.” For people who suffer from self-doubt and insecurity, prejudice heightens their self-esteem and religion provides security. If people are guilt-ridden, prejudice provides a scapegoat, and religion relief. For many people, religion and prejudice serve the same function. “One does not cause the other; rather both satisfy the same psychological needs.” (Allport 1966:451)

Also psychologist Bruce Hunsberger points out, “that it is not religion per se, but rather the ways in which individuals hold their religious beliefs, which are associated with prejudice.” Critically reviewing the observations of Adorno and Allport, he finds that prejudice is lower among those

\(^{71}\) I thank Christoph Bochinger for pointing me to that body of work.
who attend church very often than among those who attend only seldom, but is still higher than among non-churchgoers. 72 He puts special attention to the connection between religious fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism (Hunsberger 1995:113). 73 The statistical correlation between the two does not tell us which is cause and which is consequence, or in other words, if authoritarian personalities become religious fundamentalists or the other way around. He concludes that they “probably ‘feed’ each other,” or as his colleague Bob Altemeyer has pointed out, it “is likely the tendency for fundamentalists to be highly authoritarian that best explains their tendency to be relatively prejudiced against a variety of minority groups.” Hunsberger names the claims for “absolute truth,” the fear of “Satanic influence,” and the Manichean division between good and evil together with a disdain for “questing” and a high level of right-wing authoritarianism as indicators for prejudices. Religious persons, on the other hand, who admit that other religions might also hold some truth—that value doubt, uncertainty, and question their beliefs—are non-authoritarian (Hunsberger 1995:124–125).

Furthermore, he, together with his colleague Robert J. Duck, tests the role of theology, either proscribing prejudice, as is often the case with racism, or not proscribing but even encouraging it, as it is often the case with homophobia (see also Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis 1993). Hunsberger and Duck’s studies indicate that in those cases, the proscription plays a smaller role than right-wing-authoritarianism (Duck and Hunsberger 1999). However, here the question arises if the results would hold true for anti-atheism, which is not only not proscribed by religion, but even prescribed, as the damnation of the nonbeliever is a central message in many forms of religion. The psychologists Will Gervais, Azim Shariff, and Ara Norenzayan for example, found that it was belief in God, not authoritarianism, which predicted believers’ smaller willingness to

72 The differences in numbers between Allport and Hunsberger do not necessarily imply faults in measurements or operationalization though. They also could result from the different times and contexts of the studies.

73 For an application to the question of intolerance towards nonbelievers in the Canadian context see also Duck and Hunsberger (1999) and Galen (2011). Contradicting these results (again in the Canadian context), Gervais, Shariff, and Norenzayan (2011:1199–1203) found that it was belief in God, not authoritarianism, which predicted believers’ smaller willingness to hire an atheist for a high-trust job as day-care worker Gervais, Shariff and Norenzayan (2011:1199–1203).
hire an atheist for a high-trust job as day-care worker (Gervais, Shariff and Norenzayan 2011:1199–1203). 74

“How to behave in society”

My data cannot draw such generalizing statistical conclusions. However, based on the interviews, we can examine a variety of connections between religion, belief, prejudice, and authoritarianism, which might add some aspects to this discussion. I want to start with a pattern in which the outward structure of obedience is appreciated but stands relatively far from the actual religious beliefs. For that, I want to introduce two interviewees, who were part of a Christian anti-drug and life-help program in California. One young man who is in the program since very recently describes that he likes about the program that it does not analyze their past, because that would glorify the good time they had with their drug use. In the current program, they leave that past behind “and move forward and learn how to… relearn how to live,” how to be happy without drugs and alcohol, “and, just how to behave in society.” He describes that in his youth he was “rebelling against everything,” but in the program, they teach that rebellion is actually not freedom, it’s bondage. And freedom comes when you follow the rules and when you obey authority and when you live the way you’re supposed to. Then you get… then you’re free. You’re not free when you’re rebelling and you’re locked up in jail or whatever, you know. And, so that’s what I’ve learned so far. And it’s really a refreshing and innovative idea for me. I thought you do what you want and the world would just make a way for you. But it didn’t work out that way.

Here, the interviewee has decided that he wants to have a life structured by rules, because his initial want for freedom has brought him in conflict with society. While his definition of freedom seems to be equivalent with its most picayune form—staying out of jail—he describes his bending to authority almost as an autonomous act, the following of an “innovative idea.”

Another man, also from that program, appreciates it primarily because it provides him structure and a certain form of social safety net, both of which he needs after a long and complicated

74 Both, the data from Gervais, as well as parts of data from Hunsberger and Altemeyer was collected in the Canadian context, and might be of limited applicability to the United States.
history of health issues. He describes the program as setting a schedule and always giving the participants something to do. Furthermore,

We also have class work that we do. They give us, what we call “walks of faith” and “works of repentance.” So that we have a program that we’re doing on a regular basis. And then they also have other side-studies of different things that they want to. We’re working on them right now about attitude, you know… How we change our attitude. We did a Bible… These are Bible studies. These are all based in the Bible and we answer questions according to the information that they give us we read as well as verses in the Bible. […] And they’re teaching us to, in all parts of our lives to have structure and to have… and be able to follow and then also to be able to submit to authority. […] So, it gives you faith back in humanity and in yourself and to being able to follow a schedule and listen to authority and have obedience to that. […] So, you don’t wanna lean on your own understanding. It’s believing in that higher power and believing that there’s something there that’s gonna help you be obedient. […] So, that’s the reason why I’m in the program.

Although religion and the Bible seems to be a pretty big part of the program, for the two men this aspect seems to play a minor and definitely instrumental role. The relatively unspecified “higher power” is a help to “be obedient”—not even the authority to which they obey itself. Although they told me not everybody is in those programs voluntarily, both of those men have decided for that option on their own and see it—given the societal circumstances—as in their own best interests. In both cases, the authoritarian system that such a program provides is seen as a need for the men which suppresses all individuality and allows them to be a normal part of society. So, they clearly show an extrinsic motivation for religion. However, compared to other cases, they seem to be pretty accepting in their stance towards atheists: “Everybody has the right to believe, as being a Christian, as everybody who believes the way they believe. And we’re supposed to accept everyone just the way they are.” And the other one adds:

I don’t judge anybody for any of the believes that they have. And everybody has a different experience in life and way of growing up. And people change their minds also throughout their life and, ah, yeah… That’s it.
Here a strong appreciation of authority in a decidedly Christian setting goes together with moderate prejudice against nonbelievers.

Similar, a young Hispanic from a vibrant and young church in a mid-sized town in Texas, who calls himself a „man of faith” and “a big fan” of Donald Trump:

I see him as a man of success and he’s a man who sets goals and he attacks whatever it is that he’s trying to succeed. He’s aggressive at it… And that’s why I like him because I think we need an aggressive president who would just really take this country where we want it to go… get it back on it’s feet again.

Apparently, he does not like Trump despite his authoritarianism, but because of it. He sees in him, not “the icon of Christianity,” but an “aggressive, successful leader.” This stands against liberalism, which he is “not a fan of.” Atheists he finds “a little more liberated,” but is not against them as such, because some share his conservative values. Here, his authoritarianism surpasses his religious feelings, which is also expressed in voting for Trump despite his un-Christian behavior. In opting for a leader, he is “not looking for a pastor.” As opposed to many believers, he even said he would vote for an atheist, “if we shared the same beliefs in politics…” Here, again, apparently the adoration of authority alone does not necessarily cause strong prejudice and discrimination. So, in cases where God and authority are separated for the individual, authoritarianism may not cause strong prejudice against atheists.

“God is all authority.”

A contrast to that is that obedience to God is taken as a blueprint and a measure of conformism to societal norms. When I asked a group of seniors from a large town in West Texas about how they feel about religion and society, they described the decline of religion as a “force” in public morality. They describe how terrorists “have no conscience,” talk about crime rates, drugs and theft, as well as about parents who don’t teach their children responsibility, morality and work ethics. When I asked them if this “has something to do with the decline of religion,” which they mentioned earlier, they answered decidedly in the positive: “Yes, yes, definitely.” And another one: “Definitely.” A woman then explains:
Yes, it all starts with respect for God. If they don’t respect God, then they don’t respect their fellow man and they don’t respect themselves. [...] God is all authority and if they don’t accept him as authority then they do not respect the policemen, the teachers, the neighbors and people in charge. Of course, the politicians don’t always hold up their end, so they’re not… don’t have the respect; but overall, the firemen and policemen and, you know, are all to be respected, because they are in authority. And parents are supposed to rule the home and not the children. And that doesn’t always happen. That’s too bad.75

During her answer, others in the group agreed with “Yeah,” and “Amen.” While some in the group started to laugh warmly, when the example of the children ruling the home came up, she remained serious until the end of her argument. Then she imitated parents that ask for the wishes of their children:

“What do you want to? What do you want to eat?” My mother didn’t ask what we wanted to eat. She cooked what she had and we ate it. If we didn’t? We waited until the next meal.

The sequences show a grand narrative of declining religion and declining respect for authority that reaches from the whole society to the nucleus of the family. “God is all authority.” Respect for God is the precondition for respecting others and oneself, but particularly the authorities. While in the course of her argument, she paid little attention to specifically religious beliefs or religious specialists, the authorities are outlined as the law enforcement, school, the community, family and unspecified “people in charge.” It becomes clear that it is authority itself, not specific characteristics, that should lead to respect: Authorities have to be respected, “because they are in authority.” Here, belief in God serves as a blueprint, as the model for obedience and that in turn makes atheists synonymous with being a rebel, making trouble and lacking respect. So, obviously, when God serves as a force of societal order that makes for negative views about atheists.

“That’s just one of our tough edges that God is still molding.”

However, in a contrasting variation, the rigid belief in religious norms can also lead to a certain amount of independence from the world and its social requirements, as in the case of a female in

75 The interview was conducted in 2013. So, the „politicians” refers to the pre-Trump administrations.
her early 20s. She is from a nondenominational black Bible church in a small city in Texas and now works as a campus minister in another Texas city. She grew up fatherless and found her “father” in Jesus.

As believers we have to sit with each other and help each other to understand each other and ultimately point that back to what the gospel tells us and what Jesus tells us and why the Bible tells us to live, try to live in peace with one another. And so, I think that’s where many times we fail over and over again. Because we want to be right, which is our flesh. All of us want to be right. And until we learn to accept that not all of us can be right all the time… there’s going to be somebody that’s going to be wrong. And the only right person is God and Jesus. And as soon as we take it back to that place, that’s where our harmony and our peace can sit and we can learn to walk in one accord with each other. But I think that’s just one of our tough edges that God is still molding and shifting and sanctifying… and has to get us over those humps. I mean so it’s just… it’s cool. And at the same time it’s very difficult.

In a move away from being in authority herself, to overcome the desire “to be right,” she gives all authority to God and Jesus, the “only right person.” Here the rigid distinction between right and wrong is translated into the difference between God and humans. That is the precondition of Christian conformity: the walking “in one accord with each other.” Individual differences, like insisting on being right, are seen as “humps” or “tough edges” that God will get rid of.

In a way, that total submission to God’s authority allows her to free herself from the societal expectations of “this world.” She describes how in her hometown most black people believe in Jesus, but that “that doesn’t mean that they lived for Him.” After she had decided that she wanted to “serve” Jesus, those different levels of commitment caused discussions:

When I went back home to the people who were Christians—quote, unquote—that’s where the conflict began. […] They believe in the words that the Bible say, but are kind of lost still in culture, what the world says. So, therefore… when you come back and tell them: ‘this is what the Bible says,’ [they say]: ‘Yeah, but God gives us wisdom and sense to know what to do.’ I was like: ‘Yeah, but this is what the Bible says.’ And there’s this conflict in that, um, since that… still people wanted to take control of their own lives and not allowing the Holy Spirit or for Jesus to be the ultimate center, the ultimate focus of
their lives. And so, when I came… went back, they’re like: ‘What are you doing?’ Especially when I decided to join the ministry. They were like: ‘You’re not going to work to get money?’ I’m like: ‘I don’t understand.’ I’m like: ‘What is your problem?’

She contrasted her choice of serving Jesus with those who—in their incomplete, non-rigid, and moderate form of belief—brought up human “wisdom and sense” and reminded her of the economic requirements of that society. She shut out those requirements and decided to go into ministry because this is “what the Bible says.” On the one hand, that gives her the freedom to do what she wants. On the other, that requires total belief in the religious idea, because otherwise her choice in which she invests her career—the total reliance upon God—may turn out as a failure. She can’t really warm up to atheists:

The thesis is that we love nonbelievers. That’s what we want to do. We love them. And we just want them to know Jesus. So we want them to follow Him and to have that hope that we have in our heart.

She sees “conflict” with people who are not equally committed, but when she talks about an “apologist” who comes to the school and discusses with atheists, she appreciates that. She finds it “good to have those conversations, as long as you know what you believe in.” Apparently, she approves of contact only if that does not affect one’s own belief. Here, the total submission to God’s authority turns the contact to atheists into a dangerous challenge, which is to be avoided as much as possible.

“God permits things to happen for reasons that we can’t understand.”

Yet another variation is apparent in the case of the Catholic deacon with the atheist son. The Catholic father describes that we live in “a fallen, broken world because of the original sin” and that when “Jesus does come back again, there is gonna be a new heaven, new earth.” Then he switches the conversation to Donald Trump, about whom we talked earlier:

Some people say… I don’t believe he’s the Savior. You know, I’ve heard people call Obama, ‘Oh he’s the… ’ No. No man is the Savior, but I do believe that God allowed… […] But God permits things to happen for reasons that we can’t understand.
He nonspecifically refers to people who find that Donald Trump is “the Savior,” but denies that he thinks that himself. Instead, he ascribes that thought to the Obama-supporters and reminds them not to relativize the super-human qualities of the Savior. However, for him the omnipotence of God serves as a divine legitimization of the presidency of Donald Trump.

Trump’s authoritarian traits were noticed with caution: “He is very used to speaking his mind, which it can be good and bad.” Obama on the other hand was scorned, because he went “whatever way the wind blows [...] He didn’t stand for anything.” So, in the conflict between the dangers of authoritarianism and the disdain of weakness, the authority won. Where remains of democracy showed up, they were put, of all things, in Trump’s own authoritarian rhetoric:

I want Trump to do good. And if he doesn’t, guess what? In four years he’ll be gone. And that’s... I think he’s truly setting himself up for that. If he doesn’t do a good job, he doesn’t want to be there, ‘cause that’s what he’s used to. You know, ‘You’re fired.’ You know, and they’re gonna say, ‘Mr. Trump, you’re fired.’

Nevertheless, the idea that “God permits things to happen” has already put a divine legitimization to his presidency “for reasons that we can’t understand” and, therefore, devalued the people’s judgement. Through such a fatalistic argument, every course of events has to be accepted as part of God’s will.

So, my qualitative study allows for some more nuanced additions to the discussion. It shows a variety of (if by no means all) typical relationships between authority and religion. As we have seen, authoritarianism can stand next to religion in a way that does not necessarily lead to a strong discrimination of nonbelievers. But believers may also legitimate the societal order through God’s will. Belief in God can serve as a blueprint of respect for societal authority, but people can also submit to religious authority in opposition to what they perceive as societal norms. How those different relations between religion and authority correlate with prejudice in general, and the religiously prescribed prejudice towards atheists in particular, should be tested by quantitative measures. But in addition to Allport’s (1966) observation that religion and prejudice satisfy the same psychological needs, we also have to consider that religion might also perpetuate those needs—be it on the level of individual pedagogics, like in the example of the lady for whom all obedience starts with respect for God and goes as far as eating what’s on the table—or on the societal level, as was the case with the divine legitimization for Donald Trump.
Explaining God and the World—The Problem of Theodicy

If societal order is legitimized through God and his plan for the world—that is, if people assume a God who is both good and omnipotent—this inevitably leads to the question of theodicy: the “explanation of why a perfectly good, almighty, and all-knowing God permits evil” (Sherry 2008). In the following, I will not refer to theological or philosophical answers to that question (for an overview see Tooley 2015), but focus on how believers deal with the question of evil in their everyday lives, and how that affects their view of atheists.

“The Lord will not protect you from something he can use to perfect you.”

The most basic solution to the theodicy-problem seems to be deferment: A young woman from the campus event in Texas told me:

A lot of us, including me for sure, we’re like… If something goes wrong, we’re like: ‘Well, God! When are You going to fix it? Because You love me and You say that You love me. So, why aren’t You giving me all these things?’ But that’s not what it says at all in the Bible. It says that He will bless us later.

Here, with reference to the Bible, the good outcome of God’s plan, the blessing, is postponed to a “later” point. As this point is not specified—and might potentially refer to the after-life—such an argument is protected against falsification.

There is also an inner-worldly version of deferment, in which crisis is seen as God’s instrument on the way to improvement. It is expressed in a quote invoked by one of my interviewees from a mid-sized town in Central Texas:

I heard a quote last week and it said, ‘The Lord will not protect you from something he can use to perfect you.’ When those tough times come into your life, he’s going to let you go through them and you can call out to him. And man! He will be there for you. But at the same time, he may leave it there for you to learn lessons from it or to help somebody else in the same boat, later on.
In the quote as well as in her interpretation of it, the apparent contradiction between the crisis and the idea that God is protecting is resolved through the proposition that everything is part of God’s bigger plan and will turn into something good—the “lessons” learned for the future.

“As far as I was concerned, He was there.”

Obviously, the question of theodicy becomes more pressing the bigger the catastrophe is. Two Catholic women from a large town in West Texas told me:

I always think about 9/11. And a lot of people who don’t have faith said, ‘Where was your God?’ Well, as far as I was concerned, He was there because there should have been over 20,000 people in those two towers. And for one reason or another, somebody had to stop and pick up donuts, had to take their kids to school that day. I mean there were reasons that so many people were not there. And I see that kind of thing all the time, you know. So, I think God was there.

My interviewees frequently bring up the theodicy question, as something they have been asked about by nonbelievers. In order to align the terror attack of 9/11 with the idea of God’s work, the interviewee interprets the difference between the potential and the actual number of victims as the result of godly intervention. To that end, she draws on a number of reasons that would not be untypical for the time of the attack—like taking “their kids to school”—and interprets those as help from God. Her friend from the same church brings a similar argument:

I think God was on the plane, too. Those people that decided that they were going to save how many thousand by crashing it into the soil and dying themselves… They gave their lives. So there had to have some type of belief there, some type of goodness that drove them to do that because we… I mean let’s face it: We’re self-preservation. And if it becomes between you and me, usually, you’re going to choose yourself. And these guys gave their lives. So, I think there was a… God was on that plane with them and helped them through all of that to make that decision and follow through.

Here she understands the fact that the planes were crashed in the soil instead of hitting potential other targets as a result of God’s presence. In the course of her argument, she switches from the level of God, who “was on the plane” to the level of people having “some type of belief there,
some type of goodness.” She reads the incidents as the if the victims sacrificed their lives—a decision that God helped them “to make” and to “follow through,” and thereby turns the victims into martyrs. She contrasts that to the human nature of “self-preservation.” Nonreligious considerations for avoiding a higher number of victims are ruled out by default.

“You kicked him out. See what happens.”

Different answers to the theodicy question can be combined, even if they contradict each other. As their answer to the theodicy problem apparently was of limited satisfaction, given the “stuff that is happening,” the first woman adds another explanation:

And on the other hand, with a lot of the stuff that is happening, I feel that we have pushed Him away. And so many things that we’ve done. We don’t let Him come and be in our schools anymore, allow their prayer in school. We’re trying to push Him out. I read something else about: ‘He, being the gentleman He is, steps back.’

She herself seems to note the contradiction to her former statement, therefore starting out with “on the other hand.” But that does not keep her from pursuing her argument that the reason for tragedies is that people “have pushed Him away.” As an example, she gives the case of the decision against school prayer. As a consequence of that, God—being a “gentleman”—then “steps back.” Here, the theodicy question is solved in a way that God’s protection requires the cooperation of humans. At the same time, through such an argument the blame for any tragedy is put on those who do not cooperate—the opponents of school-prayer, the nonbelievers and secularists.

Another, even more striking example comes from a young man on the Austin campus:

In the past months there’s been a lot of gun control issues here in this country. And one of the common objection, which I thought was very ironic and tragic at the same time is that for many decades in the past, for the past century in this country we’ve been arguing for separation of state and church, or whatever. So we should take out any religious things in the school or in… Uh, like, separate… Just take out God. Like as a whole, you know? From schools or whatever. And when the tragedies kept happening in schools and in places where it should not have happened… the common objections that I found was,
‘If God is so good where was He? Where was He in those schools? Where was He in those movie theaters?’

Interestingly, he interprets the “common objection” in a way that avoids the question of God’s existence, and instead switches to the question of God’s goodness. And from there, he can give an answer that remains within his assumptions:

And I just comment back saying: ‘You didn’t want Him there. You kicked Him out. See what happens.’ And so, they’re kind of trapped in a sick cycle of argument that: ‘If God is so good and just, why does He keep having, have this tragedy happen?’ But it was their inherent choice that made that happen in the first place.

He, too, blames a societal failure like gun violence on the “separation of state and church.” That is reminiscent of the old covenant-idea that all get punished for the transgressions of some. Although he does not specify the concrete source of evil, he marks secularization as a particular idea—one that he obviously does not share—and describes that as the precondition for those tragedies. The question of evil as posed by objectors, he refers to as a “sick” argument. And then he even goes as far as to make them directly responsible: “it was their inherent choice that made that happen in the first place.”

This is a typical example for scapegoating. Scapegoating stands for a “process of the transfer and disposal of evil [which] seems to have existed ever since human beings held the concept that they were under the supervision of divine beings” (Douglas 1995:1). The term scapegoat was first used in a Bible translation by William Tyndale to describe the Hebrew ritual of blaming all the sins of the Israelites on a goat and then letting it escape to the wilderness, in order to atone God and purify the community of sins.76 Journalist Tom Douglas describes how scapegoating results from the idea of an omniscient god in combination with a strict set of rules. Any transgression will be framed as sin, and lead to guilt and the fear of punishment (Douglas 1995:14–15). In our example, the school shootings are blamed upon atheists. As those who have not just sinned but also defy the idea of sin, they make ideal scapegoats. At the same time, societal responsibility for and the possibility to do something against gun violence can be ignored.

76 Scape- is the aphetic form of escape. According to Douglas (1995:8), the only other term in which it is used is scapegrace, which stands for someone “who had escaped the grace of God”—in other words a sinner or a nonbelievers.

219
“That’s us being humans and failing. That’s not God’s character.”

Another way that came up in my interviews was to blame all evil on humans and their failure in general. A young person from the nondenominational megachurch in Austin:

> It makes me so sad when I hear the way that the church has mistreated people sometimes because that’s the PEOPLE. That’s us being humans and failing. That’s not God’s character at all. That’s the thing that I missed when I was growing up… is that I was taking all these characteristics of following people and putting them on a perfect God. And that’s not fair for Him.

Here, the failing nature of humans is contrasted to the nature of God, who is “perfect.” The negative, the cases in which people have been hurt in the church, are to be explained through that human nature and cannot be blamed upon God. That would be “not fair”—meaning an invalid conclusion to His disadvantage.

In the end, what all those versions have in common is they ascribe the good to God, and the evil to humans in general or nonbelievers in particular. So, the theodicy question is dodged by giving God credit for anything good and blaming everything bad on humans, sinners, and unbelievers. This results in a dichotomist distinction between God and good on the one side and bad and godless on the other.

“I knew the Lord would send somebody.”

The pattern of ascribing all good to God, comes, for example, in the form of presenting good incidents as God’s answer to prayers. One Baptist from mid-sized town in Central Texas tells me how she met her husband after prayer:

> After I did that prayer, within six months, my husband came along. Within the next six months, we were married. The next year I had [my daughter]. The next year ahead [my son]. And, we really didn’t plan for it all to happen that fast, but it was God. To me, that was God. He answers those prayers and often times it’s not done that quickly. But man! I’m telling you that, when that heartfelt prayer that he saw was a good thing for me, man, it just happened.
The pattern can also take the form of describing the help people got from fellow human beings as God’s help: When a man from small Baptist church in North East Texas tells me the story of having a blowout in a remote area, he says the help he received from a stranger was all part of “God’s plan.” He “knew the Lord would send somebody.” All the good that has happened to him is not accredited to the person who helped, but to God.

That can be combined with the assumption that the helper must be a believer in God himself. Again, the man with the blowout: “I knew it was who the Lord provided. The man was dressed very nice. Had it been a Sunday, I’d have thought he came out of church.” He apparently also told that to the helper himself—thereby making his assumption part of the conversation and of social discourse:

“You’re just the man that I prayed for.’ I said, ‘I asked the Lord to send me somebody to help me with my battery ‘cause I already had someone coming to help me with the tire and I didn’t know who else to call.’

But he doesn’t just devalue human help, he even devalues his own plan and direction:

We could sit here for another few hours and I could tell you of the many times of my life where I needed somebody. And it’s not always been the person that I expected it to be, but God has always sent someone along at just the right moment, at just the right time to be the help. Maybe not that I wanted, but the help that I needed.

That God’s help was not the help he “wanted” but the help he “needed” contrasts the actual course of events with his own expectations and elevates it—as a part of God’s plan—over his own wishes. At the same time, this pattern of thinking excludes the potential of failure both for his plans, because God knew better, and God’s plans, because they are equated with the actual course of events and appreciated regardless of the difference to one’s own.

*She “wouldn’t really have any of those desires to [...] help and change if she was not a Christian.”*

Transfered to the level of ascriptions to humans, the pattern of equating good with God can for example mean that the desire to help others is viewed as a direct function of that person’s religion. After one of the interviewees from the megachurch in Austin describes the Lord’s call to change the world for the better, he denies the possibility that his friend would feel a need to help
ANALYZING ANTI-ATHEISM

others if it weren’t for her faith: She “wouldn’t really have any of those desires to go overseas and help and change if she was not a Christian, if she does not have Christ in her heart.”

This pattern of ascribing everything good to God can survive even counter-experience: The friend herself described how she—while actually going through a phase where she did not believe in God—still felt the desire to do good, but then integrated that in the pattern nevertheless:

Since I went through a lot of that mindset, and a lot of that garbage, you know…. I still had a lot of those passions. Even though I was… I had claimed atheism, I was still a passionate person in the sense like… I did want change. But I didn’t want it for God because I didn’t believe in Him. So, while those were God-given desires, I didn’t want them for, why I thought I wanted them.

The interviewee even in her times as atheist still wanted to “do good.” But rather than concluding that the desire to help others is not bound to belief in God, she solves the contradiction between her experience and the pattern of equating good with God through calling the desire to help “God-given.” While she negates on the surface the suggestion that people can’t be good without God, her strategy confirms the strong influence of this thought.

“That life is ruined and it’s because there are those that don’t know.”

The complement to the idea that all good comes through God is the assumption that all evil must be godless. Immorality is perceived as a direct indication of the lack of godliness. A male member from a small Baptist Church in East Texas explains that through the example of a rape-case, which drove him to tears:

A 17-year-old boy was babysitting a 9-year-old and got her pregnant. A 9-year-old girl has a child. That life is ruined and it’s because there are those that don’t know. Without Christ, you have only chaos, and that’s what the devil wants. He wants people to say, ‘Oh, well, there’s no reason to try. We only have what we have here, just do what feels good.’

When I asked them later what made them so sure about the connection to the lack of belief, another man responded:
When a person has a disrespect for someone else that, you know… In the violating of someone else’s life, that indicates—it doesn’t prove—but it indicates that that person does not have the grace of God in their life to respect that person’s life. If you steal from someone, if you take their life, if you violate them in various ways, what that does is: it’s an indication that that person either doesn’t have a relationship with Christ or has never been saved. Because if they had been saved and had that relationship with Christ, they would’ve respected that other person. They would’ve respected the work that that person did. They would’ve respected the life of that person.

He initially marks disrespect, theft, murder, and violation—the term “rape” is markedly absent in the interview—as indications for the absence of God’s “grace.” He comes to that conclusion “because” of the assumptions from the last pattern, that with God everything must be good: if they were saved, they would have respected the other’s life. That shows that those two assumptions are not just logically connected but also play a role in the ascriptions made to nonbelievers: Bad actions indicate a lack of godliness. But the interviewee goes further:

It wasn’t just a fact of the wickedness of his own desire being imposed upon the life of that little girl. The fact of the matter is: It’s an evidence of the fact that God is not leading and working in his life because God would not have desired and brought about that emotion that since… that act… You know, the immorality, the wickedness that’s involved in that.

While he specifies in the above mentioned paragraph that indication does not mean “proof,” here the violent act becomes “evidence” of the godlessness of the violator, because people with God in their lives would not even have an “emotion” like that. That turns the argument into the assumption that bad things can only come from people’s godlessness and, hence, from atheists.

“All things work together for good to them that love the Lord.”

However, apparently in contradiction to that, really bad things can also be seen as part of God’s plan. Right after the man was finished telling me about the rape-case, the pastor added:

Can I say something to kind of go along with that, yet, going contrast to that? Romans 8:28 says, ‘And we know that all things work together for good to them that love the
Lord,’ ok. Well, I’m not sure whether or not that 9-year-old girl was saved or not. I doubt that that 17-year-old boy was saved. But even though we as humanity look at that as a very vile thing, a very terrible thing, that that 17-year-old boy did that to that 9-year-old girl… We think that 9-year-old girl’s life is now going to be ruined for the rest of her life… God can still use that as a way to bring her to Him if she’s not saved! She could say, ‘Ok, God, I’m 9 years old and I’m having this baby. What am I going to do?’ […] Typically when we get to times of calamity and people get in times of chaos and things, the first thing they do is turn to God. […] Maybe that may have been God’s way of bringing that 9-year-old to him. That may be a way of God showing that 9-year-old girl that even though her purity has now been defiled, she can still turn to God and he will still take care of her, because God always tells us, he says, ‘I’ll never leave you nor forsake you,’ which means that he will always be there.

Based on a Bible quote, he reinforces the idea that for the believers all things will be resolved for good. He further speculates about whether the girl was saved—of course, assuming that the boy was not. Then he differentiates between our human criteria for good and evil and the ways in which God can still “use” the incident for good—a good which he equates with the girl’s discovery of God and becoming “saved.” And, of course, God in his grace will still “take care of her” despite the defiling of her “purity.” Here human criteria—which in the case of the rape of a child with a subsequent pregnancy would probably focus on trauma, future planning, social and financial problems, the overwhelming responsibility that is placed on the child, and, if possible, consider an abortion—are devaluated as being of secondary concern after the potential for a religious conversion. So, even the most horrible incidents can be interpreted as part of God’s plan. In this morally relativistic stance, with the help of God even the bad is happening for the good. Everything else would question the believer’s image of God.

As those examples showed, the idea of a good and omnipotent god creates the question why there is still evil in the world. Where believers are confronted with this question, they find a number of different, even contradictory explanations. They range from the deferment of blessing to the after-life, to the assumption of evil as part of God’s plan for the good, to putting the blame on humans. The latter can refer to humans in general because in the religious imagination humans are prone to sin. But it oftentimes takes the form of scapegoating (Douglas 1995) nonbelievers and atheists, either because evil is seen as a result of the lack of God in their life or
because they are seen as agents who drove God out of society. Evil then becomes equivalent to godlessness.

**Painting a Picture—Ascriptions to Atheists**

Not surprisingly, the dichotomy between God and good on the one side, and the evil and godless on the other, is accompanied by all kinds of negative assumptions about and ascriptions to atheists. In the following, I want to give an overview about the range of ascriptions towards atheists known in the literature so far (e.g. Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann 2006, Norenzayan 2013, Harper 2007) and add to that from my data. I will describe the typical form of a negation of judgement and discuss how projections play a role in the ascriptions.

“At the end of the day, they still respect each other.”

Nevertheless, I want to start here with an exception: Although it was frequently brought up that people are not supposed to judge, those who stayed neutral in their opinions were rare. One of them was a middle-aged rabbi in an explicitly diverse Jewish congregation in a large city in California. Asked, what comes to his mind if he thinks of “people that don’t believe in God—who are atheists,” he answered:

I would say in general, people are getting along pretty well. Certainly, with basic socialization and socializing and stuff, I don’t see it as a barrier at all between people, in this community particularly. If you were going to have to sit down and have a conversation, a theological conversation about what each person believes, I think our community… There would be a different variety of perspectives, probably in both camps, more on the atheistic side of it versus really more people who are very strictly believers in God. I think that mostly, there could be some argumentations and discussion, but I think that actually at the end of the day, they still respect each other, still shake hands, and welcome each other. I don’t see it as a huge divide in our community particularly, even though I know that it can be divisive in other places.

When asked what he thought about atheists, he did not self-identify as theist nor atheist, but took a meta-perspective on how the two groups get along in his congregation. Although he later identified as praying regularly, his own perspective did not seem to play a huge role in his
opinions about atheists. He further said that he had “never heard of an argument or a real rift along those lines” in the five years, he served as a rabbi there. “People definitely talk about it and they share their opinions about it and there seems to be a respect for the other position.” He continued to explain the theological variety in Judaism, and that Orthodox believers probably would have more issues with atheists, but that there should not be such a divide within liberal congregations. He linked that theologically to the Jewish *aniconism*—the opposition to the use of icons or visual images to depict living creatures or religious figures (Encyclopædia Britannica 1998)—which in his opinion, guaranteed such a tolerant perspective:

> We don’t have one image of God, right? The only thing that we know is that we’re not supposed to have images of God. [...] The sense is that we can’t know, right?

The only limitation—a “big boundary”—to that was if someone were to say that God became a human being. But beyond that, “it’s hard to define.” When I asked him, if he thinks that “believers act differently or behave differently than nonbelievers or atheists,” he answered after a long pause,

> I don’t know, because I haven’t seen it. But my guess is that on the questions of ethics and morals, people that I’ve met in this community particularly, probably are similar whether they’re believers, not believers, more religious, not religious in terms of basic human… and acting. We call acts, some of the acts like a mentsh. A mentsh is just someone who’s a good person, a model citizen kind of thing.

The word *mentsh* is Yiddish and also means human (Yiddish Dictionary Online s.a.). So, interestingly, being human here has a positive connotation instead of the negative connection that it has among many of my Christian interviewees. He then goes on to explain that the only difference in behavior is “in Jewish life” with the observation of the “mitzvoth”—the Jewish commandments. But he then adds that some atheists also light candles on a Friday night for Shabbat. Asked for an example where there are differences in behavior, he mentions prayer—something that actually requires belief in a higher power.
“No judgement. Just, you know... ”

Many of my respondents expressed the intention not to be judgmental. Sometimes they might not have been aware that they are implying negative assessments of atheists nevertheless, like the two women from a Methodist church in Central Texas. Asked what comes to their mind when they “think people that don’t believe in God or that are atheists,” they answer:

Nothing really bad comes to mind. I mean the only thing that we try to do is to show God’s love. [...] It’s not a judgement kind of thing by any sort. It’s just trying to show what God’s done in my life and be an example of it instead of talking about it.

And the second one agrees:

No judgement. Just, you know... We have something awesome and we like to share it. And so, that would be what we want to do. It’s just... show what God has done in our lives and maybe see what they’re missing, what they’re missing out on.

Both immediately assure that they do not judge or condemn atheists: “Nothing really bad comes to mind.” And: “No judgement.” However, they clearly do have the idea that being a believer is better and that atheists should be believers, too. So their first responses could also be read as a typical example for what Freud called negation: a “procedure whereby the subject, while formulating one of his wishes, thoughts or feelings which has been repressed hitherto, contrives, by disowning it, to continue to defend himself against it” (Laplanche and Pontalis 2006:261–263). In our example, that is revealed when the first of the two women qualifies the nothing “bad” through a “really,” and the second one immediately continues with “just,” which implies a qualification, too. So their intention not to judge is implicitly undermined by the hierarchy of beliefs that they imply and the intent to bring them to their faith. It is, therefore, not unconditional.

Such religious conditions to tolerance and non-judgement exist in several versions. Another is that judgement is contrary to their religious ideal. An interviewee from a Pentecostal church in a

77 The German word Verneinung, which Freud used, encompasses not just the logical and grammatical operation of negation but also the psychological act of denial Laplanche and Pontalis (2006:261–263).
mid-sized town in South Central Texas, a senior male, who thought that he had never met an atheist, told me:

Jesus in His ministry, if they didn’t believe, He didn’t condemn them. He accepted them for exactly the way they were. If they didn’t accept His belief, He didn’t jump down their throat or anything like that. He just loved them and hoped then they would see the light and turn to Him.

Yet another version is to leave the judgment to God. The young woman from Austin, who earlier in her life has “claimed” atheism herself: “I’m not judge, I’m not a judge, none of us are judge. Only the Lord is a judge.” Here, she negates any judgement of her own, but does that under the premise of her own religious thinking.

However, these relatively non-judgmental statements do not exclude negative assessments of nonreligious people. This becomes clear when the last interviewee, the young woman who said, “I’m not judge,” continues:

Someone, who is in love with God and in love with Jesus is in… conformed to be more like Him. Are we going to wrong people? Yes. Are we going to choose terrible things? Are we going to be selfish? Yes. How… I’m in love with Jesus, it’s all I can speak towards myself. I’m in love with Jesus. I want Him every day, I want Him all the time. Would I ever touch and hurt a child? Never. Why? Not because I’m great, but because I see that child as someone the Lord has loved and created, and made.

That she would causally connect her nonviolence toward children not to her personal restraint or general morality, not to being “great” herself, but directly to her “being in love with Jesus” and to the thought that children are God’s creatures, implies that people who do not believe in God do not share those values. Again, not consciously wanting to “judge” does not equal abstaining from the ascription of negative traits to people because of their nonbelief.

“That’s a group that is very difficult to work with.”

I want to point out that not all people share the same reservations regarding nonbelievers. In fact, they can vary tremendously in content—to the extent that they directly contradict each other. A
rather typical ascription towards atheists is that they are intellectual. The Methodist from Dallas tells me:

That’s a group that is very difficult to work with, especially the fact that a lot of them seem to be intellectuals. So, they raise questions that can be very difficult, and they are always challenging Christians in a way that we have to think through some very hard questions.

At the same time, people also hold prejudices against atheists as less or even anti-intellectual. When talking to the pastor of a Pentecostal church in a mid-sized town in California about the fact that people in Europe on average are less religious than in the United States, he responds:

That kind of stuns me from the standpoint… People in Europe are intellectual. […] They’re intelligent. And I’m kind of astonished that the atheist persuasion is so strong there.

The people from the Church of Christ group, however, associate atheists with the oil field workers that recently have moved to their area. Asked if they have many people in their area or if they “notice the influence of people who don’t believe,” they answer: “We believe you can tell by their language.” Later another man from the same church said: “A lot of them are loud and boisterous and…” And a woman finishes the sentence with “… like that almighty bottle.” So, as already Penny Edgell has observed, atheists can be “placed at either end of the American status hierarchy” (Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann 2006:227–228).

“*If there’s no God, then there’s no reason for morality.*”

Will Gervais, Azim Shariff, and Ara Norenzayan suggest, “Distrust is central to Anti-Atheist Prejudice.” They compared prejudice towards atheists with that towards gay men in regard to the levels of distrust and disgust they were entailing (Gervais, Shariff and Norenzayan 2011). Based on theories of genetic and cultural evolution, Norenzayan argues that religion, or more specifically Big Gods, who are morally concerned and omniscient, guarantee the upholding of cooperation in large, potentially anonymous, groups like today’s societies. Belief in a supernatural monitor, who punishes transgressions of community standards, enforces norm compliance. Atheists are seen as potential “free-riders”—meaning as people who enjoy the benefits of group
cooperation but may cheat when they have the possibility, because they don’t fear the supernatural monitor. Therefore, they are distrusted (Norenzayan 2013).

My research shows that it is indeed a prominent ascription to atheists that they are not trustworthy: Asked if she would “trust people who do not believe in God,” a woman in front of a Walmart in a mid-sized town in South Central Texas replied:

I think I wouldn’t trust them as much as the ones that do believe in God, because they… To me, God is your conscience. And that’s who guides you. You know, the Lord, Jesus Christ, was put out here to save us from our sins, and I was brought up that way, and I continue to believe that way.

A non-related man in front of the same store, asked if he would “vote for someone who does not believe in God,” answered:

No. […] ‘Cause all… To me, all moral boundaries are set from a religious context, even though the context may be thousands of years old. It’s proven to be true. And if somebody does not understand that concept… I don’t think they’re worthy to be voted on. I mean, you know… ‘Cause you got to have a… You have to be anchored in something.

Another man, one of the born-again Christians from the fair in California, said about nonbelievers:

Most of ’em are not bad people. They just are misguided as far as believing there’s no God. And if there’s no God, then there’s no reason for morality, really. Everybody can decide their own morality. If I say something’s right and you say something’s wrong, who’s to say who’s right? If I grab your pocket book, and I run because I need the money, is that right or is it wrong? Well, if it’s wrong, why is it wrong? You know? So, we have to have some standard for morality. And if there is no God and there is no afterlife, it doesn’t really matter what you do. We’re all gonna go, you know, cease to exist.

Here, we can identify certain reoccurring elements that lay at the root of distinguishing believers from nonbelievers: 1. The idea that there needs to be an externally set morality, that one has “to be anchored in something.” 2. The idea that this morality comes from religion, that “God is your
conscience.” 3. The idea that this is linked to retribution in the afterlife, and if “there is no afterlife, it doesn’t really matter what you do.” And 4. that as a consequence, atheists have no such morality, because “if there’s no God, then there’s no reason for morality.”

Norenzayan points out that to a certain extent also applies to the valuation of other faiths—something I can also confirm. The young man from the Christian life-help program in California recounts: “Employers tell me that they liked to hire religious believers because they are more honest and trustworthy.” When I asked him, if he thinks “that’s true,” he responds:

I mean, it depends on the person but I think it can be true. [...] with being honest and trustworthy [...], because most faiths encourage being completely honest and no… and not lying, and loving each other and helping each other out, putting others before yourself. And I think if you don’t have a belief, you don’t necessarily feel obligated to do these things. You can kind of do whatever you want and live for yourself instead of putting something else above yourself.

So, not only does he consider that as a possibility himself, if his report was true, there are also employers who openly admit to discriminating against nonbelievers at the workplace because they see them as untrustworthy.

Furthermore, a very similar reasoning can be observed within non-Christian faiths, and indeed, one of the most vivid examples for that pattern stems from the Muslim respondent in California:

The only way you can establish justice: By believing in one of the… the God. Because the atheist thinks, there is nobody there to punish them. He can do any injustice to this world and to another human being and anything he can do.

While he seems to change his mind from “believing in one of the” gods to believing in “the God” as a precondition for justice, he marks the atheist as exempt from this because of his lack of fear of retribution. Although “this world” seems to be at the center of his concern, worldly agencies of punishment, like the state or society, don’t seem to count in this reasoning. Only God can serve in this function:
Because we are always fearing the one who is watching me. The one, God is watching me. What I’m thinking he knows and what I’m doing he knows. I can hide from human beings.

He concludes:

So, the atheist, I believe, in some point of time, he cannot a hundred percent be truthful. He will be like… of some places he may be doing wrong things. He may be… He thinks nobody’s watching him and nobody’s controlling him. Because we are as a believer, we’ve always been and believe that Allah is watching us. Every action is being watched. Everything we are doing is completely recorded, and everything will be on the Day of Judgment, it will be given back to us. So that is the difference between our belief and atheist.

While in his argument he concludes that the atheist “cannot a hundred percent be truthful,” many believers also acknowledge that atheists can be moral, too. That often stems from knowing atheists—an indicator that experience can overcome prejudice to a certain extent. Some simply tell me about knowing good atheists. A person from a mid-sized town in Central Texas: “My friend was a good person, you know, and… So, it… He just didn’t believe.” A young woman from the campus event in Austin tells me about a friend of hers that she met when she started college and who is active in a secular group on campus: “He believes in like a lot of the same… principles, I guess, that I do. Like his whole idea is to treat people well.” Another young woman at the same event has worked together with atheists in a team on a human rights issue. She tells me:

I got to observe how the Christians approach it and how the non-Christians approached it. And both of them were equally passionate about it. Equally compassionate towards the victims.

Others derive that from more general considerations about morality. The young Methodist from Dallas tells me:

I do credit the Muslims though for having a strong morality they get from their scriptures. But the atheists, just because you’re… to be an atheist doesn’t mean that… You can be an atheist and still be very, very, moral. And that’s very true. And there are a lot of those
out there that are very, very moral. Where do they get their morality from can vary, but I wouldn’t think that their morality would be… Anyway there’s probably a difference in the source of where they get the morality, but that’s not a big deal. […] Morals are morals, so…

In other cases, however, even experience will not change a general consideration: A man from a Catholic church in a large town in West Texas, who finds atheists “a bit boring,” because they are missing hope in their lives, told me:

There has to be some sort of deep belief, I think, to lead the kind of life that really helps one another. Not that the… You know, a lot of people that do not believe and they in some ways are better Christians than those that do. But the bottom line is, it’s what… the underlying belief that motivates you throughout your life. And it has to be lacking in someone who does not believe in a higher power.

He readily acknowledges that there are atheists who are good in “some ways,” but doesn’t count that, because they are lacking the “underlying belief.” As a consequence, of this argument, a good atheist is ruled out by definition.

There is also what I would call a religious reservation to the idea that atheists can be moral. It comes in a variety of versions. One is captured in the phrase that atheists can be “better Christians.” Here, Christianity is defined as the synonym of being good, and other people are measured in relation to that. The pattern can also take the form of a differentiation in degree: A man from a megachurch in a small California city told me: “I would say there are more atheists that do bad things, but there’s a lot of Christians […] that do bad things too.” Another version is to set Christian norms as standard and then measure atheists according to it—a measure that puts the content of morality over the religious aspect of it. A Catholic from a small city in the Californian Central Valley told me:

There’s actually are respectful atheists. We have been at abortion clinics with atheists that are there because they believe abortion is wrong. So there are some common grounds but there not very many, but um… there’s some atheist people that say they have good morals, they just don’t believe in God.
As a contrast, there is also a stance in which morality is declared secondary after belief. A female born-again Christian from the California information stand:

As far as getting along and being polite, being honest if, just, you know… A lot of them generally are all friendly people. But the difference is that they don’t have… They’re not saved by being nice, you know what I mean? […] So it’s not about works. Works don’t save anybody.

Others seem to also integrate atheists in the range of beliefs that qualify for “something bigger.” A male Catholic from a large town in West Texas told me:

Being Christian, Catholic, or any faith, we believe that there is something bigger than us that has given us choices of making it a good or bad. And also I wish we always do good and it doesn’t matter if we’re Christians or we’re atheist, that there’s something that strives us to do good always.

Apparently, here, too, belief in “something bigger” is seen as a precondition for doing good. But it remains open whether the interviewee interprets atheism as another form of belief in the supernatural, or also understands an inner worldly vision as something bigger.

So, Norenzayan’s thesis definitely bears some truth, as distrust is indeed a frequent problem, and believers themselves describe the lack of an after-life retribution or punishment as the major reason for their distrust.

“Language” and “Lifestyle”

However, research shows that ascriptions to atheists are much broader than those centered around distrust. There exists a whole variety of stereotypes related to atheists as was shown both by studies about atheists’ discrimination experiences as well as in the few studies about believers’ perceptions. The group around Edgell reports that some of the respondents associated atheists with criminal behavior, drug use, and prostitution, and others with consumerist or elitist lifestyles (Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann 2006:227–228). And in a study by psychologist Marcel Harper (2007), who collected data about the content of anti-atheist prejudice with the help of a list of almost 400 items, which were partly gathered through an open question, being immoral got only
about 50% consensus, while atheists are most often believed to be “rebellious” (70.87%). So, when there were more than the two options of distrust and disgust that Norenzayan and his team tested for, distrust did not seem to be so prominent anymore. Further, among the descriptions was questioning of everything, nonspiritual, anti-Christian, opinionated, individualistic, hard-headed, argumentative, pleasure-seeking, nonconformist, self-seeking, daring and independent, which all reached a consensus of 60 to about 70%. Harper groups the ascriptions to atheists around six subtypes: 1. Judgemental Cads, 2. Cynical Critics, 3. Hedonistic Bohemians, 4. Skeptics, 5. Straightforward Individualists, and 6. Seekers (Harper 2007:passim).

If I wanted to group the long list of ascriptions to atheists, maybe the most elementary pattern would be that atheists violate religious commandments. That goes as far as assuming that the nonreligious do not abide by any rules and exclusively follow their desire. A male Hispanic from a Catholic church in a small California city told me:

And that is what we are afraid of as Americans in this country because of the modern trends, the belief that the devil has worked... his greatest triumph... One of bishops said, in the 20th century, that the greatest triumph that the devil has ever achieved is for people to believe that he does not exist, that Satan and evil does not exist. And once you don’t believe that there is a heaven and hell then, why behave? Why follow laws, why follow laws? People say, ‘Well if it makes you feel good, do it!’ Well, I like chopping off 3 year old’s heads. Makes me feel good. No. That’s not right. There, you have to know the difference between good and wrong and once you know the ways Satan can manipulate you, you’re only safeguard is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Next to such grave examples, where atheism is associated with murdering little children, there are a whole variety of transgressions that violate norms which have a religious foundation. A lot is captured under the catch-phrase “language,” which usually refers to “taking the Lord’s name in vain” or cussing and blasphemy, and the catch-phrase “lifestyle,” which often is a circumscription for homosexuality, but can also include other things connected to sexual liberation like divorce, adultery, pre- and extra-marital sex, “carnal” or “fleshly” desire, and prostitution. Special

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78 I have excluded in my presentation of Harper’s results those adjectives that are very similar to the lexical meaning of atheist: “not religious,” “unbelievers,” and “faithless.” Not all of the studies were conducted in the US. While some of Norenzayans evidence comes from studies in Canada, Harper’s study was done with psychology students from South Africa.
attention is placed on the violation of what many believers call “family values,” like, of course, the “value of life,” which usually stands for a stance against abortion but also respecting one’s parents, and faithfulness—in its double meaning as having faith and remaining faithful in a marriage. In the view of many believers, those are values that don’t matter to atheists.

Beyond such a violation of what many believers view as religious values, there also exists a general perception that atheists are too liberal. That can—and usually does—include being politically on the liberal and Democratic side but also strongly focusses on general questions of life-conduct. In this pattern, I would place a general sense of freedom and “free living,” which is associated with challenge, rebellion, anarchy, chaos, trouble, a lack of direction in life on the one hand, and of not being civilized and exhibiting shocking behavior on the other.

There are a significant number of ascriptions in the direction of being egotistical and selfish—in which, again, religious norms play a significant role. Atheists are sometimes seen as lazy, but more often seen as ambitious, greedy, and longing for gratification. They are depicted as prone to competition, money, career, and success. This includes the ascriptions that atheists are not willing to share, that they do not help others or volunteer for the community. To many believers, atheists seem to lack empathy, love, and compassion, and—as already shown—conscience and moral guidelines. That goes as far as associations with cheating, lying, betrayal, and backstabbing, as well as with dishonesty and criminal behavior. Sometimes they are seen as ungrateful, unable to forgive, and revengeful, but also as devoid of remorse and repentance.

This individualistic pattern also entails that atheists are often seen as typical representatives of the modern, secular world. They are connected with the Enlightenment and intellectualism, and seen as proud or even arrogant, argumentative and opinionated—although sometimes just called ignorant, “dumb,” and “foolish.” In the imagination of many of the believers, atheists go out a lot, party, flirt, and have fun. And they are very often connected to drug use and alcoholism. They are associated with superficiality, consumerism, fashion, pop-culture, Hollywood, and R-rated movies. They seem to care only about the image that others have from them. A specific case of that pattern is the frequent accusation that atheists either worship other things, like money or success, or make gods out of themselves. They are often seen as immature, pitiable or in need of help, as lost, as unaware of the purpose of life, and as not valuing themselves—even allowing for suicide. They are described as unhappy or sad, fearful or coward individuals, who are missing all that is meaningful to the believers.
But at the same time they are depicted as aggressive, destructive, and degenerate, as hateful, angry, anti-religious, and as attackers and harassers of the religious, who hurt their religious feelings and “take away” their rights and freedoms. They are seen as lacking respect, as being blunt and offensive, and are associated with slander and even arson. As such, they are no longer seen as victims and products of the modern and secular society, but as the reason for the societal change behind it. They are seen as political, as a major influence upon society and government, as anti-American, a threat to religious and personal freedoms. They are made responsible for tragedy, terrorism, and famines, and are accused of forcing others to act against their religious principle and of being a hindering block in others’ salvation. Finally, they are connected to a number of political directions, from communism, to socialism, and anarchism but also to neoliberalism and nazism.

“Extreme immorality, free living”

If we inquire regarding the reasons for this long list of ascriptions, some might be rooted in actual behavior of atheists: When belief in God is the societal norm, not believing is an expression of liberalism and that translates into actual differences. And so, believers are right, when they think that atheists most likely vote for Democrats—a fact that can be shown statistically (Cox and Jones 2016). However, ascriptions to atheists can sometimes be inverse to statistical reality, like in the case of criminal behavior, where believers score higher (Zuckerman et al. 2016:82–83). This indicates that the ascriptions to atheists have more to do with those who apply them than with the atheists themselves.

Adorno brings up an example of a woman who rejects atheism and gives as her reason that an atheist funeral seemed “cold” to her. She denied contradictions between religion and science, calling the mere idea of such a contradiction a “malevolent invention.” Adorno interprets those ascriptions as a projection of “her own uneasiness about this conflict upon those who speak it out” (Adorno et al.:735). The term *projection* means an “operation whereby qualities, feelings, wishes or even ‘objects’, which the subject refuses to recognize or rejects in himself, are expelled from the self and located in another person or thing” (Laplanche and Pontalis 2006:349).

I found several indications for processes of projection in my material, which I want to illustrate with just a few examples. Projection can involve intolerable sexual wishes (Laplanche and Pontalis 2006:349–356), “sinful desires,” as my interviewees call that. In an interview with the
pastor and the student pastor of a Pentecostal church in a mid-sized town in Central Valley California, which they described themselves as very “conservative” and “not open-minded,” I’ve been told by the pastor:

Atheists, of course, they do not acknowledge God. Consequently, there is no religious or spiritual guidelines for them to follow. They’re more open to whatever. They tend to get themselves… And their free sense of living, where there’s no set boundaries for them to live within. Consequently, their freedom a lot of times causes them to implode. They destroy themselves.

When I asked him later if he could specify what he meant with implosion, he concretizes:

They destroy themselves from within. It’s not things that from without that destroy them. They’re an atheist or an agnostic; they have no resistance. And so they’re open to anything. They involve themselves in extreme immorality, free living. They have no consequence in their mind for their own. They’re very free and that kind of a lifestyle destroys them from within, coming out. It’s almost like a cancer eating on the inside of them. That… After a while, their life ends up and just shreds.

Asked for examples, he continues:

There are a lot of people… I’m talking about people who have… Morally they’re bankrupt. They’ve many, many, many marriages. Divorces. They get… Their homes are destroyed. As a result they start… they’re drinking. They start the drug use. They look for a release from the mental anguish that’s going on. And as a result of that, they open themselves up to a little more. A little stronger drug, a little more drink. And in the process of that, they destroy themselves.

He ascribes promiscuity to atheists, “many, many, many marriages,”—something that seems to take up some space in his imagination, as one can see through the triple emphasizing of the word “many.” Remarkably, he calls it “marriages,” thereby pointing to the pleasant aspect of it, and only afterwards adds the “divorces” as the aspect that violates religious norms, and often is unpleasant. He connects drinking and drugs to a suffering in and from the world, the “mental anguish that’s going on,” which he does not seem to limit to the atheist but which he states in a rather generalized way. He describes those condemned activities as based in the desire to be
released from that. But if one allows for such a “release,” it is dangerous, destructive, and a vicious circle.

When I asked him if they “have people like this here in the area,” he responds:

We have people like that in the area, but not because they’re atheist so much as much as they’re just not practicing Christians. […] They’ve allowed sinful activity to come into their life and, like… Any area. I mean, it doesn’t have to be metropolitan to have alcoholics, drug users. No religion then, huh? That’s throughout the world, not isolated to this one country. All the world is struggling with that.

Here, he links the ascribed behavior not so much to atheism, but to the lack of Christianity, thereby actually reaffirming his attribution to the lack of belief. The sinful activities are described as coming “into their lives” instead of being part of an inherent desire. But immediately after, he admits that this is some general problem with which “all the world is struggling,” including the rural area in which he lives. Interestingly, the other interviewee, the student pastor of the church, adds to this by actually describing a process of repression—although not of the repression of desire:

When you give your life to God, you lose the desire to do all those other things. And the people that have turned their back on God […] and start living this life. It’s, and… For example, I know some people, close people, that did that, turn their back on God and I would ask them ‘Why? How do you—when you believed this for so long—turn your back and live this way now, and you know it’s wrong what you’re doing. It’s not… According to the Bible it’s sin.’ And they would say they mentally just block it out. Just every time the thought of God comes to their mind, they just get their mind on something else. And so when people begin to do that and do that as Pastor was saying, they start to spiral downhill. It just… They lose. There’s not the godly convictions and the spirit to lead them and guide them down the right path. They just give in to all this; the trying to fulfill, trying to hide, trying to get rid of the pain, trying to… because and when you’re living for God, the only way to get rid of the pain is through God, is through His Spirit.
He, too, more or less readily admits that those desires are human, except for those who gave their “life to God.” In the next sentences, he then describes a process of denial. But instead of explaining why believers wouldn’t have those desires anymore, he tells me how former believers have to repress or “block” out the thought of God. The contradiction between the undramatic way he described them turning “their back on God” and the dramatic struggle that he sees in them, suggests that he projects his own struggle with “sin” or “desire” in only slightly modified form on the nonreligious.

“They’re pushing agendas on children in school.”

A special form of projection is given with narratives of atheists seeking dominance and control in America. One example is from a male born-again believer in San Diego, who told me:

There’s a big breakdown in society with morals and all these things. They’re teaching… They’re pushing agendas on children in school, immoral stuff. Teaching them about sexuality, right? Not only alternative lifestyles but also normal heterosexual sexuality, too. They’re gonna teach kindergarten students, kids in the second, first, third grade, you know? They’re far too young to learn about certain things, you know what I mean? They’re depriving them of their childhood, you know? It’s just a breakdown of society and then people are pushing their agendas on… their alternative lifestyles, its, uh, its… They have no right and business to be pushing these things on children you know? There is such a thing as normality and, you know? And its, uh, could be… To teach them not to hate other people because they’re different, that’s fine, you know what I mean? That’s always positive if they teach children not to hate. But they’re going past that. They actually want to push their agenda on children and brainwash them.

He sees society’s morals in danger because of what he calls the “pushing” of “agendas” on schoolchildren. The first thing he mentions as “immoral stuff” is sexuality and “alternative lifestyles.” He negates that he is mostly concerned with homosexuality, and states instead that children are generally too young to learn about sexuality. Heterosexuality he calls “normal,” thereby marking homosexuality as abnormal. But while he classifies different forms of sexuality, he ascribes an active and aggressive act—the “pushing” or the “brainwashing”—to the nonreligious other.
He later goes on to ascribe an all-encompassing desire for control to the federal government—which then was still led by Barack Obama—and the United Nations:

They don’t have the right to play God. Nobody has the right to play God, you know? But they… There aren’t… And it sounds kind of extreme and bizarre to some people, but you can find it right on the computer. The United Nations has got a plan for socialistic government, one world government. […] They want to have a government religion. Where they want to… They’re working towards it. They want to pull all religions in together. And that’s against God’s words. God’s words says ‘The only way to the Father is through the Son, Jesus Christ.’ So if they’re going, if they’re going to… We’re not to hate other religions, but we got to stand firm on what God’s words says. Otherwise, we’re not following the Jesus of the Bible. We’re following a different Jesus, which is a falsehood. There’s only one true, uh… There’s many false teachings out there, you know? And that’s been going on for ages, and there are many false teachings and… The true Jesus Christ is the one that… When a person studies the Bible and sees what it says and he understood what it says…

So, while he is clearly convinced that there is only one right religion, he ascribes the desire to install a state or “government religion” to a secular institution like the United Nations. This is “to play God” for him—meaning a right that is reserved for God, not for them. He only later adds that nobody has that right. He seems to be aware of this contradiction at some level, because even after clearly expressing that there is only one “way” for him, he did not follow through with the argument that there is only one truth, and instead swerves to the “many false teachings,” thereby applying and denying the differentiation that he ascribes to the others. Our interviewee’s image of the United Nations imposing government religion upon the country seems a reflection of his own “agenda.”

Adorno and his colleague, sociologist and philosopher Max Horkheimer, describe in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* how, in the case of anti-Semitism, persecutors project their own aggressive desires into their prospective victims. They “have always seen in the victim the pursuer who has driven them to desperate self-defense” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2009:154). If we transfer this analysis to the topic of anti-atheism, that would explain my observation that Christians, who are the vast majority in the United States, often feel discriminated against by atheists, who are a relatively small (and often discriminated-against) minority.
Those examples showed that, although the lack of morality is a central topic in ascriptions to atheists, as Norenzayan, Gervais, and Shariff (Gervais, Shariff and Norenzayan 2011; Norenzayan 2013) suggest, there exists a whole variety of stereotypes that are applied. While many believers themselves report that they do not trust atheists because they don’t fear after-life retribution, the dangerous characteristics and desires that they depict them with seem to be projections of their own repressed desires. Although not all believers judge, and many don’t want to be judgmental, the ascriptions are often applied in a way that paints a negative picture of one’s own faith. Interestingly, in this process, freedom itself often is depicted as dangerous. From that, I would conclude that the religious are not just afraid of atheists but also of their own desires that are in violation of religious norms or that they don’t feel free to voice because it would stand against the idea of religious freedom that they themselves evoke.

Treating Them—Attitudes towards Atheists

Finally, that leads to the attitudes that come with those ascriptions. While there are a number of studies about how atheists experience attitudes towards them in American society (e.g. Foust 2009; Hammer et al. 2011; Garneau, Christopher R. H. 2012), so far, almost no research has been conducted about how believers look at that. In all likelihood, their perspective will differ from the perspective of the atheists. So, to ask believers how they treat people may not give an all-encompassing account of anti-atheist discrimination. Nevertheless, it seems important to study the believers’ view, too, because it allows for some insight into their motives and reasoning. In the following, I want to give an overview about the various types of interactions that believers report to me and give some examples for each of them.

“The last minority it’s ok to discriminate against”

However, I want to start with the discrimination experiences of atheists in order to put the believers accounts in perspective. One of the first academics to include atheists’ discrimination experiences was anthropologist Robert Heiner, whose respondents reported discrimination in the areas of family life, workplace, and business. Additionally, he described atheists’ concerns about the prejudices their children have to face (Heiner 1992:7–8).
In the *Groundbreaking Study of America’s Nonbelievers* by Bruce Hunsberger and Bob Altemeyer, discrimination experiences—and the lack thereof—are reported by the respondents, from tensions with family and partners, and friends, to the loss of a job, to property damage, to harassment and threats (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006:45–53).

Among the atheists interviewed by communication theorist Christine Foust, all shared the feeling of exclusion from American society. One respondent said: “We’re like the last minority it’s ok to discriminate against. You can still get away with saying bad things about an atheist…” (as cited in Foust 2009:18). The forms of reported discrimination reached from simple ignorance and ostracism to the loss of a job and threats to blow up an atheist convention (Foust 2009:16–35).

And an internet-study among atheists by researchers of the Center for Atheist Research counted data for 29 different forms of discrimination, with 82.4% of the respondents “witnessing anti-atheist comments in newspapers or on television” more than four times within the last five years. Almost 95% of the respondents witnessed such comments at least once. Almost 80% were “expected to participate in religious prayers against [their] will.” And more than three third were “being told [their] Atheism is sinful, wrong, or immoral.” Almost 10% had been physically threatened because of their atheism, over 6% had had their property damaged, and 2% had been physically assaulted because of their atheism (Hammer et al. 2011:54). The open questions the researchers asked revealed different discrimination stress narratives that were centered around the respondents assumed religiosity, in the sense that many believers just expected them to be religious, too. Atheists lament the “lack of a secular support structure” and the “lack of church and state separation.” They report negative effects on their families, unreciprocated tolerance, and anticipatory stress because they worry about what future events like weddings, funerals, and others might hold for them (Hammer et al. 2011).

The reported forms of stigma differed widely in quantity and quality, as sociologist Christopher Garneau found out: They range from cold and unfriendly interactions or negative comments to hateful references towards them in local newspapers, accusations that they would destroy the family’s reputation or problems at the workplace. One person even was denied medical care due to her nonreligion. Others reported property damage, threats of physical violence, and actual violence, like being slapped by their Sunday school teachers as children or having rocks and cans thrown at them during a protest. Forms of institutional discrimination were related to the recognition of a secular group (Garneau, Christopher R. H. 2012:42–49).
So one can conclude, as sociologists Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith have, that many atheists see themselves “as an embattled minority with an uncertain future in religious America” (Cimino and Smith 2007:413). But while the experience of the nonbelievers certainly are a very important indicator for discrimination\(^79\), that does not really provide a lot of insight into the religious motives behind that discrimination. Therefore, in my analysis I want to reconstruct the attitudes towards the atheists from what the religious people tell me.

“I look down on them”

I heard one of the most direct forms of derogation in regard to atheists not while interviewing, but from a taxi-driver. I got a cab in San Antonio and talked with the driver about my reasons for being in the United States. I told him that I was doing a research project about how people respond to atheists, and that the results were quite surprising to me, because before I came to the United States, I thought many people would look down on them. Without letting me finish my sentence, he responded, “I look down on them.” When I asked him why, he responded that that he does not look down on them, that he just had “no use for them,” and then exposed a rather typical view about atheists having no faith and no meaningful life. He did not want to be interviewed, and I chose not to get in any further discussion before he dropped me off at my destination.

The distance he expressed through saying he had “no use for them” is reflected in a number of my interviews as well. The young male Methodist we met earlier told me that he finds interacting with atheists not worth the time:

I live in an apartment complex with lots of people that don’t… that I would say are of secular style of life. And now, here is one thing that’s interesting: I don’t spend a lot of my… I wouldn’t invest a lot of my time with someone who I consider secular for the sake of becoming like very, very close and deep relationship or friends, because it just would be like mixing oil and water and this doesn’t… just don’t mix well. But, um…. So, I will say that, I don’t spend that kind of intimate time with… And there was a case where I thought what, that this is something that I felt led to do, to spend that kind of time with

\(^79\) And I myself have conducted over 70 qualitative interviews with nonbelievers in which I asked them how they feel perceived and treated by believers in American society. I was not able to include them in this work but might very well use them for another study.
someone like that [...] like this is a good thing to do and I do it. But the most part, I don’t look to invest a lot of time there mixing up things.

The rejection of “mixing” indicates a categorical distance. Not to “invest” one’s time in “secular” people implies that they are somehow not worth it, because one has little expectation of getting something back. The only event in which he can imagine creating an “intimate” relationship with “someone like that,” was when he “felt led” to do so because it is “a good thing to do.” So, he sees spending time with atheists as a charitable endeavor rather than something he would do out of interest or friendship.

Such a categorical stance seems to be especially present for romantic relationships. A woman from the Campus event in the Texas city, tells me that she does not want relationships with people who are not as steadfast in their belief as she is:

It seems like the only guys that that try to pursue me are non-Christians. And so, there’s always this indifference of: ‘Well, that can be your thing, but I’m not going to be involved.’ And I’m like: ‘No, no, no! You don’t… you don’t understand. This is my life!’

She explains that she grew up in ministry, and that this is central to her family, for her identity, and as a sincere commitment: This where she is “supposed to be.”

This is not something I just play on Sundays and then live some other way the rest of the time. No, this is real! And this is what I’m doing. And if you’re not going to do this with me: Bye. Just walk away. Because otherwise it’s just it’s not going to work. And it’s going to be miserable. And I will be the most miserable person you will ever see in your life. Just go away. Don’t do this.

She cannot imagine being with someone who does not share her level of commitment, even if they are accepting of it. She shuts them off categorically and sends them “away.” Without full commitment, “it’s going to be miserable.” Interestingly, she does not explain why that would be the case. But apparently, religion is the main criteria through which she chooses people. It is almost as if she has built a fence around herself, and connects with people mainly through the medium of religion.
Another case may give insight into where such a categorical distance comes from. Asked what they think about someone who does not consider themselves spiritual but an atheist or an agnostic, a man from the interfaith group, who called himself a “religious vagabond” and now vaguely associates as Protestant, clarifies that “by definition” an atheist says that “there is no god.” Then he added:

I would walk away and say, ‘I wish you a good life, and I honor your opinion and your own human mental ability.’ And then… ’cause, I’m not going to do anything or say anything to that person that would help them.

He would distance himself from atheists and tell them that he wishes them “a good life,”—thereby implying that he will not see them ever again—together with the phrase that he honors their opinion. But although he signals that he has given up on proselytizing to them because there is nothing that he could do that “would help them,” he still makes it clear that they somehow need help. Furthermore, it indicates that for him a helping one would be the only worthwhile conversation or interaction with nonbelievers. He then continues by explaining:

Because the minute I walk away from that person and open the door and look outside, it, it’s a… Except for the things that will crumble, and the things that are polluting… the things that are getting in people’s way… I… This had to be done by somebody or something that is much, much higher power than I could ever conceive. And just a branch, a tree. Of a rock, the river, and the tree. So I can… Very, I can very easily let them go, I think, and I can very easily go on my way, and hope that they’ll come around.

Interestingly, “the minute” he walks away, he assures himself of the existence of God, which “this person” had questioned. “Except for the things that will crumble,” the beauty of the earth must be the product of a creator. So, apparently, in order to maintain his belief in creationism, he needs to avoid contact with those who question it.

“And no! She’s not allowed to date my son!”

The woman from the Baptist church with the atheist friend shows that this distance from atheists can easily turn into exclusion. Asked about the first thing that comes to her mind when you think of people “that don’t believe,” she answers:
What hits with me initially when you ask that question, is what the picture of a Christian is supposed to be. I initially think, okay… well I already know what the book, what the textbook answer to that should be. Um, should I… Do we extend a… . Help, to clothe and reach and be a friend to and help someone who we think is somehow less fortunate than we are? However; I as an individual, I have a real hard time with that. Not because it’s not a sound teaching, because that’s very clear what it says in the Bible. But I think the more humanistic approach to that… Or the more it appeals to our humanity is that my initial reaction truly is to be guarded. Because I find myself torn between letting people that I know don’t have the Holy Spirit in them too close. But then, how do I reach out to them? How do I be a friend to them? How do I connect with them?

She contrasts the Christian ideal—to also extend help to “someone less fortunate”—with her own feelings. To be “guarded” and not to be sure of “letting them too close,” speaks of fear. But she calls that the more “humanistic approach,” which for her apparently is equivalent to acknowledging humans failing to live up to the Christian ideal. However, together with the prescribed idea of reaching out, this creates a dilemma.

She then tells me the story of her helping a stranger: While driving her car one day early in the morning, she saw a lady walking along the road crying. She didn’t “know her from Adam” and “didn’t know if she was saved or not saved,” but she felt compelled to stop and help her—which she describes as a rather “rare impulse,” something the “Holy Spirit” must have led her to.

I didn’t have my kids with me, so I didn’t have to worry about protecting my little innocent ones from someone who could potentially be distraught for… because they were intoxicated or anything else that might be going on that they’d given themselves over to in the moment. And it allowed me to look beyond that, so that I could genuinely care about their soul. Because maybe she was saved, maybe she wasn’t, I don’t know. I still don’t know. That’s between her and God. But she was another human and she needed help.

Her fears in regard to a person who is not “saved” were that they could present a danger for her children, because they were drunk or otherwise out of line. Interestingly, she does not consider that something bad has happened to them, but only that “they’d given themselves over” to
something bad. Despite the fact that she is very good friends with an atheist, her fear transforms into exclusion, as we see when she goes on:

I have three little boys. I would love to know... I mean you bring a little girl home you wanna date, that’s just fine. I wanna know if she loves God. So yeah, that’s at the core of what our beliefs teach us. Because then I know that if they both love God, they’re both gonna kind of have the same view. It’s not about are you both Baptist? Not about, you know... I wanna know if you’ve had a personal moment where you accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior; as the living God that He says that He is. If you’ve had that, I’m all about it. You will both love the people around you in the same way. And that’s important. I would be devastated if I... one of the boys was wanting to date a little girl that said, ‘Oh no, and I don’t believe that there is a God.’ Oh man! We need to have a talk!

She brought up the topic of dating herself, so that seems to be something that she is concerned about. The first thing that stood out was that she expects her children to have the same faith as she does. Her sons’ opinions don’t seem to matter in that question. And while she presupposes that, she worries about whether they would place the same exclusive attitudes towards nonbelievers, because if so they wouldn’t date an atheist girl in the first place. So, apparently this fear of having an atheist in the family already occupies her mind long before her children reach dating age. Second, this seems to be the only criteria for her: “If you’ve had that, I’m all about it.” Apparently, to be born again Christian vouches for all other personal traits, like in Max Weber’s theory about the Protestant Sects (s.a. [1906]), which guaranteed for their members trustworthiness and credibility.

A man in the interview obviously did not find the thought of dating an atheist girl as scary and made a joke about it: “We’ll pray for that young lady. Pray that mom don’t know.” But she could not quite find it funny. She responds “Yeah right!” with a laughter, but then goes on serious:

But no! But it’s because I worry. It’s because I would worry. I would worry about that young woman and whether or not she knows how valuable she is. If she knows about how valuable her parents are? How valuable every life around her is. Because that’s the core of what we believe if we have that faith. And, no! She’s not allowed to date my son!

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80 Not surprisingly she also assumes them to be heterosexual and to date girls.
As the joke of the man questioned the urgency of her concern, she feels compelled to give an explanation. She first brings up a certain concern for the girl. So, the exclusion that is entailed in not wanting your kid to date an atheist is veiled through an interest in the well-being of the atheist herself. But that disguise doesn’t last long. When she asks if that girl knows “how valuable” her parents are, or even “every life around her,” she directly associates atheists with not loving their family and a contempt for other people’s life. Here, it is obvious that generalized negative associations that people have to atheists can directly lead to exclusion on the most personal level.

“I just don’t think a nonbeliever would want to join.”

Exclusion of atheists is often structurally and institutionally ingrained as well. The believers may not even be aware of it. And it is not just limited to the private sphere but also present in more public organizations. It is discussed frequently in regard to youth-groups like the Boy Scouts, where atheist kids or volunteers are not allowed to become members, as Weiler-Harwell has laid out (2011:67–105). However, when I interviewed a Girl Scouts group from California, it became apparent that even less explicit rules could be excluding. The Girl Scouts stopped making mentioning of God a requirement in 1993, because in regions with big Native American or Asian American populations they had trouble finding enough theist applicants (The New York Times 1993). The original Girl Scout Promise says: “On my honor, I will try: To serve God and my country, To help people at all times, And to live by the Girl Scout Law.” But the application form adds that “When making the Girl Scout Promise, individual members may substitute wording appropriate to their own spiritual beliefs for the word ‘God’” (Girl Scouts 2017). So, the Girl Scouts’ policy is significantly more tolerant than that of the Boy Scouts. In addition, both the girls and the parents of the California based group that I interviewed were open-minded in terms of different religious beliefs. As one of the parents said:

As long as you’re... you have a believe system. To me it doesn’t matter which it is. I’m totally open, and in fact, I like a variety. It’s less about a name or a label. And it’s more about how you live through that system of values and how you create a family community around those values, than it is about any kind of a label.

Asked, how they would feel about people who do not believe in God, one of the girls said,
I would still accept them and I wouldn’t judge them for that. I wouldn’t agree with what they believed, but I wouldn’t try to influence them.

It became apparent that they would not want to exclude atheists from the group. However, during the course of the interview the actual problem was discovered by one of the girls:

If you don’t believe, I think the Girl Scouts welcome you. I just don’t think a nonbeliever would want to join, because they don’t want to have to say that they will serve God.

Both kids and parents realized during the interview that they are actually excluding, and felt ambivalent or negative about it. However, apparently neither the girls nor the parents were aware of the possibility of substituting the word “God.” That all of them recited the Promise with the word “God,” further gave an impression of religious uniformity. So, despite the fact that the organization tries to be open, the continuing existence of the original pledge may still be discouraging for non-theist girls. And, of course, belief systems that are not “spiritual” but atheist or naturalistic are still officially excluded from the organization. So, here we have a case where exclusion of nonbelievers occurs regardless of the intent to be inclusive and to include people from all religious backgrounds. While it is not clear if the organization intended that in their policy, it was clear that the girls and parents in my interviews did not intend that, but reproduced an exclusion that is grounded in long-lasting policies and institutions.

“To take some of that language out”

As a contrast, other believers are aware of the difficulty that nonbelievers might face in a mainly religious environment, but defend that as the right of the majority. A man from a Methodist church in a mid-sized town in South Central Texas tells me that, aside from church, he also spends his spare time in groups that are not related to religion. Then he says:

But 90, 95% of those other two non-church groups are Christian oriented folks. So it’s still pretty much dominated by that. […] By the conversations we’ve had… Or maybe… a smaller town it’s more open and kind of known. So nobody’s excluded because they’re not a Christian, but… And I know where most people stand, having had long term relationships but I don’t either seek out or deny folks as that, as a criteria for friendship.
He negates excluding or to directly “seek or deny” friendships by the criteria of religion. But he acknowledges that he knows “where most people stand.” This does not present a problem to him. Instead, he actively works to keep that Christian dominance:

We’ve elevated the sense of tolerance—which is a great concept to the point that not. You know, you have to tolerate the one person out of a thousand that wants this to happen or that to happen. At what point does that no longer work? We shouldn’t oppress that one person but at what point do you give them so much freedom and expectation that they then are oppressing the thousand who don’t feel the same? I don’t know where that line is but we are definitely moving away.

He has observed a raised tolerance that extends his own. For him, there does not seem to exist the possibility of a neutral space that is equally open to all. The acceptance, which the nonreligious minority gains is a loss for the religious majority. He even thinks it is “oppressing” the majority. This shows that for him it is about keeping the privilege of the majority.

In the same interview, his friend then complains that they “cannot display a Nativity scene or a Cross, because somebody is offended, and, yet, the guy that goes down the street with the boom box” has to be tolerated. The group complains about rap music and R-movies. He goes on to say that this kind of problem is even present at the local community theater, where he is a board member.

A play will come in and it’ll have that language, and then they’re going to debate whether or not to take some of that language out. It’s the play, but it’s also playing in this environment. And I… They never take enough out for me. […] I object frequently to the language aspects and they try to, you know… Well if it makes the point—ok that’s fine. But if it’s superfluous or just to get some entertainment value then no it shouldn’t be in there.

Apparently for them, the problem does not start with the moment where they are inevitably exposed to something in the public sphere—like to the music from the boom box—but already with the existence of cultural products that do not conform to their religious norms in a theater where people are not forced to go. Exclusion does not just affect people but also cultural
products that violate the local norm code. This is an active form of censorship, designed to suppress everything that does not conform the local majority.

“Bible says ‘Love thy enemy as thy self.’”

However, in my interviews open rejection was relatively rare. The more typical answer was: “We love them anyway.” This love came in a number of different forms and had a number of different motives, as I want to show with the conversation of two women from a Methodist church in a small city in Central Texas: When I asked if they knew atheists, one brought up her sister, saying, “They’ve made their own decisions in life.” She stated that

We love them no matter what because we don’t want to be setting a bad example for Christians, by acting like a bunch of idiots, being like: ‘I hate you because you’re not a Christian,’ or whatever.

Only later she says:

We just try to make them feel a part of the family, because my sister is important to us. I have nothing but sisters. Exactly. […] We want to have a close family of love, you know. Just knowing that we all have a difference of opinions. We all do different things in our life. And my life may not be what my sisters had in mind for them. And that’s fine, but we still want them to know that we love them, no matter what, and that in the end you really have to answer for yourself. I mean we are not gonna go… When we die we’re not… We obviously believe in heaven and judgement. You know, if that really is true I’m not gonna be there with her. That’s her choice and my choice is…

Here, two different motives for love are present. One is independent from religion: The first speaker loves her sister because of the family bond. And while family bond is also prescribed by religion, it is obviously more than that. So, this is love despite the religious difference, which here gets reduced to a “difference in opinions.” She wants them to know that they “love them, no matter what, and that in the end you really have to answer for yourself.”

However, this family love was only the second point she brought up. Her first motive was not to give Christianity a bad name by acting like “a bunch of idiots.” “Love,” in this case, is just an instrument to retain an image of tolerance. The religious condition to love was actually far more
common than the unconditional love that was expressed in the latter part. It came in a variety of forms; one example is from a man from the Catholic church in a large West Texan town:

I don’t look at them as any different. I’m not biased against them and saying ‘Oh, they’re atheists. I hate them.’ […] You have to ask, why they don’t believe and at the same time we can’t put them as being outside; we’re all humans. And for me, it’s like, even if they don’t believe—our faith says, ‘we love one another.’

He makes an effort to not be biased, not to hate. For that, he switches to the meta-level of asking why they don’t believe. He stresses the common humanity and the religious prescription to love “one another.” So, while his motive is religious, he extends that love to nonbelievers.

However, there are also religious forms of loving the others while openly condemning them. The woman from the Baptist church in a mid-sized town in Central Texas, after telling me that her little brother is “as gay as they come” and that she is opposed to homosexuality because the Bible forbids it in the Old Testament and Romans Chapter 1, asks

But at the end of the day, do I love him because he’s my brother? Or would I love him anyway? I love him because… I love him anyway because of my faith. Because if he was just my brother and I wasn’t… If somewhere I had missed the part about salvation and I was just doing my religion, then I wouldn’t have that natural thing in me to love him anyway. I’d be mad at him for what he’s doing. Because what he’s doing takes away from the very family institution that God instituted here and there’s only two that he put here: the church and the family. Those are the only two institutions he gave us. According to what we believe, according to that Bible, that’s it. So, I would hate him for that. Christ died for every one of us. Christ died for our church. I should hate him for that. But I don’t. And it’s not just because I love him because he’s my brother. It’s because I absolutely love him like I love every one of my gay friends.

When a man from the same interview suggested the phrase “Love the sinner not the sin,” she answered: “That’s right.” In contrast to the women of the first example, who loved her sister’s family despite their differences, because they were family, she says she loves her brother because of her faith, while she otherwise would not. She explains that she actually “should hate” him for
his homosexuality because that violates her family norms—which are also prescribed by religion. But she takes another religious norm, to “love the sinner,” to temper this hate and turn it into loving “absolutely.” Paradoxically, the “natural thing” that she has inside herself, that makes her “love him anyway,” is accredited to the faith in salvation. Other potential bonds, like the love of a family member, are pushed in the background: “It’s not just because I love him because he’s my brother. It’s because I absolutely love him like I love every one of my gay friends.” Here, love becomes a dogma, rather than a feeling. It remains abstract because it disregards how the loved person actually is.

The love motive is even more contradictory when it comes in the form love your enemy. When asked, “what goes through your head or through your heart when you think about people who don’t believe, who just don’t believe in God,” a man from the small Baptist church in North East Texas said:

There’s a lot of lost people out there… But we’ve got family that are lost, and we know, ok. The Bible says, ‘Judge not unless you be judged, but you can know your brother by the fruits that they bear.’ So, we’re fruit inspectors, so to speak. Ok. But the only thing you can do now as being a child of God: Bible says, ‘Love thy enemy as thy self.’ Ok. So you love them. You let them know you love them.

His first association is judgement, but he remains ambivalent about whether to judge. On the one hand, there is the religious norm not to judge, on the other, inspecting someone’s “fruits” necessarily implies such a judgement. But this ambivalence does not remain. Already in the next sentence, he associates the nonbelievers with the “enemy,” regardless of the fact that they are “family.”

“I’m also filled with compassion for them instead of anger and judgmentalism.”

Next to love, the other most common reaction to my questions was the expression of pity and compassion. This also has its blueprint in the Bible. At a Texas campus, I met a nondenominational Christian male college student and had just started interviewing him when an acquaintance of his, an immigrant student from India, joined. The acquaintance was agnostic himself, and told me afterwards that the Christian and his friends were very welcoming and helpful in the beginning, but that they constantly pushed him to come to Bible study. The
ANALYZING ANTI-ATHEISM

following conversation took place with the agnostic already present. When I asked what came to his mind when he thought about people “who don’t believe in God,” the Christian student answered:

There is a scene in the Gospels where Jesus is like up on a mountainside and He looks out and there’s a multitude of people. Like almost without number. And it says… He turns and He says to His disciples, He says… Well it says, He’s filled with compassion for them because He calls them… it says He calls them ‘harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.’ And so, I would… yeah in the word in Hebrew that was used, He’s moved with compassion; deep down it hurts Him; He’s ‘moved in His bowels’ is what it means. When I think of people who don’t know God, I think of that. Compassion.

In the picture of nonbelievers as “sheep without a shepherd,” he refers to Matthew 9:36. It builds on an image of humans as in need of guidance. A sheep symbolically stands for a “timid docile person,” who is “easily influenced or led” (Merriam-Webster s.a.x). Interestingly, he does not explain why they are in need of help. That they do not follow Jesus is enough. But that gesture of Jesus, to find the others in need of help and thereby elevate himself, is also taken up by believers. When I asked him more specifically about people who “are just convinced that there is no God,” he said:

My first inclination is to be like: ‘You’re WRONG!’ And to be upset. But if I’m honest with myself, I’ll be like… There was a time in my life where I actively rebelled against God Himself. I enjoyed doing the things I was doing that I now believe are opposed to what God desires and so I can’t say with confidence: ‘You’re wrong.’ Well, I can’t say judgmentally: ‘You’re wrong!’ It’s a humble: ‘I know where you’re at and I believe I know the truth.’ And like I said, I’m also filled with compassion for them instead of anger and judgmentalism.

Like many of my other interviewees, his first reaction is “to be upset” because he finds it “WRONG” what these people think. However, he avoids a conversation about right and wrong, re-defining not believing in God as rebelling against him, and then presents that as a developmental stage that he has overcome already. Therefor, instead of judging, he—most humbly—presents himself as understanding and knowing “the truth.” So the position of the
Many believers are adamant about helping. One person from the Campus event in Texas:

I feel sad. I guess. Yeah. When you are Christian, you feel like you do have more of a purpose. And it’s not… It’s sad that when you think of how they could be saved. Jesus came and died for everyone. And He’s still pursuing them, even if they turn away from Him and turn away from Him. The only thing that is keeping them from salvation is themselves. A choice. And it is sad, like you can’t help them. You can’t force them to… You can only try and help and help. But, ultimately the choice is theirs and… You can only try and trust in God that He will eventually show them, and help change their heart. And you kind of just like… You feel sorry for them and you kinda get angry at them like: ‘Do you see all these magical like wonderful signs, and things? And how much good comes out of Jesus and the Bible, and everything?’ And they still turn away from him. It’s sad. And it’s… disheartening. But… knowing Christ and Christians, it gives you hope for something better for life after… And you know that they’re not going to have that. It’s heartbreaking. They can… All they have to do is accept Him, and nothing else. He’ll forgive everything. Still they don’t.

Almost the same response comes from the Muslim interviewee. After telling me that not even Mohammed was able to convince his uncle, who had raised him, of his new faith, he tells me:

I will be sorry for my son or my relative if they’re not understanding God. But at the end of the day, I don’t have any control. It is… My feelings, my sorrow… because I know what is going to happen if they don’t believe, but I will try my utmost to teach them and ask God to guide them. It’s the only thing I can do.

He also expressed his compassion for any relatives who would not find the God he found, but presents himself as powerless against their resistance. Here, as in most other interviews that showed compassion, we can also observe that the feeling goes hand in hand with a position of superiority. The respondent can feel wiser when he says, “I know what is going to happen if they don’t believe,” and when he tries to “teach” others. This self-authorization through the motive of compassion and aid also surfaced in other interviews. From the image of Jesus “up on a
mountainside” that calls people “sheep without a shepherd,” to thinking that other people are “wrong” but oneself “know[s] the truth,” to trying to “help” the nonbeliever to find to Christ—all these forms of compassion elevate the speaker in a higher position. Compassion in that sense may therefore primarily have a function for the givers themselves. And the assumed superiority that my first example—the man who looked “down on them”—gave relatively frankly also appears in many of the most loving and compassionate expressions.

“I ask them daily.”

The notions of “love” and “compassion” don’t just provide a legitimization for mission—they also seem to generate a sheer endless energy for it. Many active believers see it as a responsibility, even as a “burden” to convert others to their faith. Many believers told me how they use every opportunity that was offered to talk with people about religion, that they ask their god to provide those opportunities, and sometimes that they themselves seek or create them. As many of them have found or renewed their faith in a crisis, they sometimes see situations in which other people are in crisis as an “opportunity”—as we’ve seen earlier with the nine-year old that was raped and is pregnant.

Oftentimes, missionary attempts seem to be the driving force behind believers’ interactions with others. They are using their existing friendships to try to bring people around to their faith, and sometimes they even befriend nonbelievers for this purpose. Some tell me that they approach strangers, even make “visitations” to their homes. One of my interviewees from the small Baptist church in North East Texas told me how persistent he is in his efforts:

    Even my neighbors, I ask them daily, you know, ‘Can you... Do you want to come to church with me?’ They claim to be saved, but they don’t live it.

Apparently, atheists are not the only group believers “witness to.” They also target people of other faiths or people who are of a different—or less intense—branch of their own faith, or people who “claim to be saved but don’t live it.” And maybe most importantly, they also include children in their religious work—be it as parents, grandparents, or through schools.

As already seen in the example of the man who proselytizes to his neighbors every day, some care little if the other side is interested. That the nonbelievers “don’t want to hear about it” or that
they “don’t want to hear that they are wrong” are common phrases, but it often doesn’t keep them from continuing the missionary efforts.

Sometimes their attempts are limited only where they meet legal restrictions. One of my interviewees, a woman who came to the United States from China and was a schoolteacher there, complained that she has less “freedom to preach” in the United States than in Hong Kong. She worked in public schools and still substitutes for teachers. When I asked her, if she speaks about religion there, she answers: “I cannot. Cannot do any religion in the public school or the hospital.” And that she finds “not fair to those who didn’t know God.” If she could, she would tell her students that Jesus died for us, teach them how to get rid of sins, and about the gospel: “They need this.”

In private settings, oftentimes the only restriction comes through the resistance of those who are the targets of mission. The pastor of the church of the interviewee, who asks his neighbors every day, explained to me:

>We’ve got a burden to tell someone about Christ. But the thing is: the choice is theirs. God put within man a volition, an ability to make a decision. And when we share with Christ with someone, I can’t make that decision for them. I can’t impose my opinions or thoughts or ideas, or anything upon that person. That has to be their choice. […] Yet at the same time, I don’t want them to impose anything on me because I have to make that decision within my own life as well.

Later a woman in the same interview expands on that:

>If we shove it down their throat, it could completely turn ‘em away forever. You have to be careful and take it slow and give God a chance to work in their lives and in their hearts. And sometimes he does it fast, sometimes he does it slow. We just have to trust him and do what we can. I mean, we’d love to shove it down all their throats. We’re like: ‘What?’ We can’t believe that they don’t believe. We would, you know, but we know we can’t.

Her frank answer that they would “love to shove it down all their throats” caused a warm laughter in the group, but no one disagreed. In the two quotes, we can observe some basic features of Christian and particularly Evangelical mission: Some believers see it as a responsibility
that has been put on them as a “burden.” While the idea of choice or volition acknowledges the
obvious—that you cannot force people to believe in something they don’t, the answer of the
older lady showed that the very idea of this mission is to expand and hence, to eliminate diversity.

There are, of course, many people, who do not consider mission a part of their religion and do
not engage in missionary attempts. And that does not just apply to non-missionary religions like
Judaism but also to believers of other religions, who practice their faith for themselves or in
community without attempting to bring others to the same belief system. A Catholic from San
Francisco, when asked how he would feel if someone from his family would tell him that they
“don’t believe,” responded:

It doesn’t affect me. Because one of my nieces just told me. You know, she’s Catholic. Because of the things she heard or we heard about the priest doing something, molest people, and she said she doesn’t believe in going to church anymore. So she doesn’t go to church. So, that’s her right. I mean, I cannot force her to do something that she cannot… doesn’t believe. Because that’s her life.

Although he is not oblivious to his niece, he refrains from trying to bring her back to church.
And this is not just legitimized with the pointlessness of the effort—as in many of my other
interviews—but also with the other persons “right” not to be forced. Others do engage in
missionary activities but limit their efforts to those people who are interested, and give up when
they realize that the other person is not.

“It’s going to continue to knock heads with a secular society.”

However, the logic of expansion makes it already clear that, despite the love and compassion,
religion carries with it a great potential for conflict. As I have laid out (Klug 2017b, see also
Klinkhammer, Klug and Neumaier under review), at their core those issues are grouped around a
number of lines: 1. the base of truth and the legitimate sources of knowledge; 2. the justifications
of morality; 3. appropriate modes of human interaction; 4. the rules of conduct; 5. ideas about the
formation and organization of the world, and 6. the meaning of life. I’d like to illustrate that with
some examples.
A student, who said he grew up in a Christian family but was an agnostic until right before he came to college in Austin, describes the relationship between believers and atheists:

I think believers and nonbelievers, for the most part, at least here in the States, can get along just fine. Very peacefully. But not politically! Not at all. Because the… We disagree on fundamental issues, when it comes down to nature and man. And this… How this whole world functions. Right? And what its purpose is to mean. And I think, and then, when we get into very touchy subjects such… like right now in the Supreme Courts is talking about homosexual marriage and all that. And we can disagree, and it can get very heated and all that. But, there is no end to the discussion. There’s no end to the argument because we are fundamentally… not on the same pattern of thinking. And that is what it comes down to: Believers believe that God has created everything and God has placed a certain order of things into this world and we are supposed to follow these. Right? Believers do. But nonbelievers, it comes down to the fact that there is no Lord in their life. So, it comes down to their pride issue that I think… they shape whatever they want to believe. And because they’re… We don’t have the same Lord, we don’t have the same stand on morality, would call, there’s no end to the discussion and in that case we can’t get along. Not at all.

While he believes the religious and the nonreligious as people can get along fine, he sees “fundamental” differences in politics resulting from different ideas about the formation of the world. For him, God as creator “has placed a certain order of things into this world and we are supposed to follow these.” This order also codifies the rules of life-conduct, as in the case of homosexuality, and the “stand on morality” in general. Consequently, the idea that God created the world directly justifies a set of norms that are binding for humans.

When I asked a group of Catholics in a small city in California Central Valley if they saw “any conflict between Christians or non-Christians or atheists in society,” a man answered:

Very much so. Because their value system is completely opposite of ours! They don’t believe in family Morales, they don’t believe in respect and love for one another, helping one another, mainly, most of them, are atheist people.
He then went on to tell me “there actually are respectful atheists” because some protested at abortion clinics with them. But to him, this is not the most important aspect:

I think that the main thing that we want to achieve as Christians is: We’re here just a temporal condition. Life is very short. But while we’re here, basically the Catechism of the Catholic Church is… ‘Why do we even exist? We exist to know God. Once we know God, we will love God. Once we love God, we know we have to serve God.’ Okay? And by serving God, we have to share the word of the Lord, and to help one another and to let them know that we only want the best for our brothers and sisters. But basically without knowing that… I don’t see how we can serve… how we can serve our fellow man without that gift of love that He showed us on the cross.

In his account, life is meaningful only because it is lead in a godly way, in “serving God.” Without that, he cannot imagine “how we can serve our fellow man.” So, apart from this godly calling, for him, human interaction is void of meaning.

Another interviewee from a Pentecostal church in a mid-sized town in South central Texas elaborates on the idea of man that this is based upon:

I just know that there’s society as a whole—not just in this country, but other countries—are starting to turn more towards intellect than they are faith in a higher being. And I think that’s kind of scary because the… If we put our faith in mankind we often get let down. In fact, we will get let down because we can’t always achieve the things that we would like to achieve within a given time span um. We also have the fallacy to let each other down. I mean, just think about your personal relationships. It doesn’t matter how much you love somebody and how much you revere them. They’re going to let you down at some point.

For him, the question is if society has based its truth upon the human “intellect” or upon “faith in a higher being.” In what seems like a generalization resulting from a disappointing experience, he considers “faith in mankind” to be dangerous, because humans are not reliable. Interestingly, he does not spell out how reliable God is, but switches to the level of societal order and authority. “Christian principle” is the foundation of morality. He then goes on to say:
We just have to be careful and I think that as long as there’s that part of society that does cling to its faith, it’s going to continue to knock heads with a secular society that wants to get away from that.

So, he sees the basic conflict as between the Christian “part of society” and the “secular society.” This implies that he cannot imagine Christians as part of a secular society without conflict. For him, the two are not compatible. He then says that without Christian values, we would be left with “anarchy.” This in turn reveals the cause he believes this conflict is based upon: It is imminent as soon as people differ from the Christian principle.

Another of my interviewees, the young Methodist from Dallas, describes the tension, which he calls a “big war” or a “cultural war,” as a fight for dominance:

There is a tension, there is a tension, but I think it’s mostly between not atheists per se, I don’t think it’s the atheists and the Christians. I think, it’s people with what I would call secular agendas where the tensions lies. So, What I mean by that is: A group, the group of people that are more fond to the idea of: let’s take pretty much religion across the board and keep it in a personal…, keep it tucked away from everyday living. So, for instance, public schools: Let’s not do prayer, let’s not do Bible reading in public schools. And in the court rooms: Let’s not put the hand on the Bible and confess that we must tell the truth. Let’s take those kinds of religious symbols and practices and not base our society on them.

He does not condemn atheism as an identity, but what he calls a “secular agenda.” Conflict starts when atheists begin to question Christian dominance in society, or in other words, when Christians are about to lose their privilege. He criticizes the “sleepiness within the church” and contrasts that to this other huge movement in America that just either are of a different faith or don’t really care to be a part of faith at all. So, it’s becoming… When I was a kid, I think, you would have thought, everybody pretty much believed in God and everybody pretty much went to church on Christmas and Easter. Just a given. But now, if that would be twenty, about twenty years ago, but now, gee! Society has changed so much that you really, if you meet somebody, you would think, I don’t… No idea what background they are. They can
be Muslim, they can be Catholic, they can be Protestant, they could be Hindu or just don’t associate themselves with a church at all. It’s very different.

So, although in the beginning he contrasts nonbelievers with “religion across the board,” and on another level does credit Muslims for their morality, for him the “cultural war” is between Christians and people of any other religious or nonreligious “background.” To him, they all form one “movement.” He describes a societal change, and with it the fading of the Christian conformity—that “everybody pretty much went to church.”

That fight for societal dominance is centered around the question of which role religion should have in society and how it’s influence should be executed. Obviously, the question of the separation of church and state is at the core of that. Many Christians cherish that principle because it belongs to American history. But more typically, it was criticized as the result of the impact of the godless on the country. A man from the Methodist church in a mid-sized town in South Central Texas tells me:

The whole concept of separation of church and state is a 1950’s Supreme Court decision. It’s not originally constitutional… So, religion was to be protected from government and we were to be protected from the government saying, ‘You must believe this.’ But government was never intended to be protected from religion.

The others in the group agree. The contradiction that is entailed in the idea that government should be influenced by religion but should not impact believers can be only resolved in a society with complete religious homogeneity. Another man goes on to connect that to school prayer, Bible readings in school, and the *Ten Commandments* in courtrooms, which he finds important. To move away from this,

Is the wrong direction to go. Because it’s no longer taking a look at what religion has to offer. And going beyond just the Christianity, uh, religion. But even taking a look at… There are some wonderful things that come out of Buddhism, that come out of the other religions that really ought to be considered as you start to take a look at governing the people. And if you say there’s got to be a separation between church and state, then that breaks it apart. That says, ‘Ok, you not have a secularistic or a socialistic government that
society... And you kind of carry on to other areas there but...

So, apparently, he sees himself in the position to assemble a set of thoughts that should guide the government. For him, there are also “wonderful things” in other religions that “ought to be considered.” However, he does not opt for equality, but instead uses that recognition of aspects of other religions to justify his argument against the separation of “church” and state. My interviewees from this church imagine “everything should be within the bounds of the people that are doing, having, believing,” a kind of “local decision making.” A woman from the same group then describes how this would function, for example, in a school:

Right now: ‘Thou shalt have no word of God at all within your school!’ Well, maybe our school doesn’t feel that way. Maybe I as a person want to have a pray with me and my friends. And we’re not imposing on you. Go do whatever you want over there, while we’re… Whatever. It’s just getting way too tangled.

She interprets the law as a ban to pray voluntarily with her friends, which she finds non-imposing to others.81 The entanglement that she criticizes is not institutionalized school prayer, but the laws against it. However, her example already implies that not everybody is part of that Christian unity, and that there are people “over there” that would be excluded. Nevertheless, she maintains the image of a “school [that] doesn’t feel” like giving up Christian dominance. So, in the name of the freedom of religion she advocates the right of the majority.

As a place where societal norms are reproduced, schools are frequently described as an area of conflict. Next to school prayer, the curriculum in sciences class seems to cause the most controversy. A group of Methodists from a small city in Central Texas reflects on the debate of teaching evolution or Creationism. A woman said,

I think that’s just another way of one extreme to the other. I think that we started off very Christian-based in our schools and now they want the complete opposite. Not necessarily whether it’s right or it’s wrong or that they’re even teaching both sides and giving children

81 That blurs the line between the end of institutionalized prayer and a ban to pray on a private matter. That again shows that it is about societal dominance instead of freedom to practice her religion.
the opportunity to decide for themselves what they feel is right, which... Once you get older you kinda do that on your own. If you study, you feel what’s right for you.

She laments the “extreme” option to teach only evolution, and argues for the inclusion of a more balanced option of teaching “both sides.” While there is a variety of different religions, and all of them have different ideas about how the world began, reduction to two sides eliminates the religious diversity in the United States. Her professed goal is to give “children the opportunity to decide for themselves what they feel is right.” So, in a setting where Christianity is not dominant anymore, she wants to keep the right to “decide for yourself.”

This debate about the truth and the legitimate sources of knowledge obviously affects children. A girl from the Girls Scouts group from California tells me how confusing the difference in teachings between the church and the school is for her:

It’s kind of hard nowadays because in school and science class saying how, ‘Oh, this is how oceans were created.’ But some people believe that God created oceans and land and how everything formed and then when the… And your textbook it’s saying, ‘Well, this is how the oceans form and this is how the continents formed,’ and it’s kind of hard because you’re learning how it is but you stil... You get influenced too much. Because it influences how you believe like: Well, God created. But then they’re just saying something completely different that, ‘Oh, that happened just because of how the earth and earthquakes,’ and stuff like that. So it’s... So that’s... And also a reason how people get influenced and then...

A term like “nowadays” from a school age girl indicates that she’s reproducing a debate previously held by adults. For herself, it is impossible to reconcile the teaching of plate tectonics with the religious teaching that God created everything. Like her, children are exposed to contradicting worldviews from which one has to choose. But the possibility to choose “what they feel is right,” as the woman has put it, already places faith over fact. It is not about “whether it’s right or it’s wrong,” but about influence and dominance.

Other conflicts arise around issues like abortion, divorce, gay, lesbian, and transgender rights, religious symbolism in government buildings, prayer in public ceremonies and the slogan “Merry
Christmas,” if used by public institutions. Furthermore, from popular culture like movies and music, and consumerism.

It is impossible to avoid being affected by those conflicts, because everybody is exposed to society and its norms. But if we take a look at the mechanisms that work in those conflicts, it shows that it is also difficult not to perpetuate those conflicts. Even those who try to take a neutral position are entangled through language and societal context. Asked if they see any “conflict between believers and nonbelievers” in the United States or in California, one of the men from the Christian life-help program tries to take a meta-perspective:

Both sides, once they find out which side of the fence they stand on, they stop listening or they dismiss them. Or they just say, ‘Oh, he’s one of those people. We don’t agree with that.’ So, they just shut their ears and keep going. Both sides do the same thing. And it’s like when you’re watching TV. You can tell some shows are like liberal, atheist type shows and other ones are more right wing and, ah… And they’re both… There’s no like middle ground, where they… There’s nothing that is not biased.

He describes how the conflict has hardened between two camps and how people are not receptive to the other side’s argument. However, even this seemingly neutral call for a “middle ground” is not as unbiased as the speaker intends. Calling liberation (as in the term “liberal”) of people “biased” against the “right wing” perspective ignores what the latter stands for: the regulation of people and their lifestyles according to a conservative set of norms. So, meeting the “middle” between the two perspectives would still imply limiting people in their behavior.

The extent to which people experience that conflict differs. The other man in the interview tells me that except for the “classrooms,” he sees relatively little direct conflict that comes out in the public in an outward way. I think we hear of it more, in our church or whatever. Or those people when they’re with their group of people or whatever. […] I think there is a lot of give and take in the people. I still believe that they’re human.

So, apparently for some people—even for some in a firmly religious setting where they “hear of it more”—cultural conflict is of minor relevance compared to being “human.” However, others see the conflict escalating. A preacher at a market in San Francisco told me:
I just think we live in a biased culture. I don't think we have a balanced situation now. It's biased against religious people now. That's basically the world, where the majority of television programs, songs, billboards, having the internet and stuff is something the opposite of my worldview. We're the minority now, and I really believe that there will be a day when the Christians are imprisoned in America.

Here we see again how the existence of something that is opposed to his religious norms alone lets him speak of a “biased culture.” Although Christians, at around 70% of the population, are by far the majority in the country (Pew Research Center 2015a), he imagines them as a “minority,” that soon will be “imprisoned.” The violation of his norms in the form of TV programs that he cannot approve of, for him, equals potential persecution. That different lifestyles exist next to each other without conflict is not an option he can imagine. When I asked him what he means with “the opposite” of his worldview, he immediately started to condemn:

The options for life that are offered now, that are normal, are very destructive for these people’s lives and I just don’t think it should be given as just an option […]. I think homosexuality is a very destructive lifestyle, things like that. Also, the level of drinking and drugs that’s very destructive—just a lot of things from our society are very destructive to people.

While he was afraid of being persecuted and “imprisoned” for his belief, he puts himself in the position to judge other lifestyles. Among the “options for life that are offered now,” which he finds “destructive,” is homosexuality—even before drug use and drinking. That he seems to be familiar with the internal struggle that differing from the norm can produce becomes obvious when he continues:

We’re going to blur the lines that are… people… Psychological health is what is important, when they’re destroying their life. […] I mean it’s just like a psychological comfort. I don’t mean their psychological health totally but the psychological comfort, that they must feel good about themselves even though they are not good people. That’s what Christianity was: You have to actually be a good person to… Don’t feel good! You need to BE a good person. Adolf Hitler could have felt really great about himself, but that wasn’t right.
He apparently envies the ability to “feel good,” because for him differing from a lifestyle regulated by Christian norms seems to be connected with guilt. They are “not good people”—in Christianity “you have to actually be a good person” in order to feel the “psychological comfort.” His comparison of nonviolent deviance from the norm, like homosexuality, drug use, and drinking, with a mass murdering dictator like Hitler is not just a Holocaust relativism, it also shows how strongly he perceives the liberal other as a threat to his fragile worldview.

Yet others evoke apocalyptic scenarios. After a man from the Methodist church in the mid-sized town in South Central Texas complained that “it’s becoming more acceptable” to be a nonbeliever, a woman tells me:

I guess I kind of think of them, if we can say them as the squeaky wheel. And so in order to keep them quiet, government and whatever keeps doing whatever they’re asking for or wanting to do. And I think more of the faith family as the meek that will inherit the earth. And it’s a very slow revolution, but I think it’s, it’s moving up. It’s quieter. […] Just because we’re not voicing our opinions as greatly and strongly as the others are. We don’t always feel like we’re getting our way, but I think in the end it’s gonna flight through. […] They say the pendulum has to swing all the way one way before it will come back. I don’t know if we’ll all be around when it comes back but…

When I asked her what her ideas were “about how that will happen,” she said: “If I had an idea I might be out there doing something about it.” And when a man from the interview suggested “maybe some pain and suffering,” she responded: “Yeah, there you go.” The man feels reminded of “Sodom and Gomorra,” and asks himself: “How much different are we? And when is that wrath of God going to come down?”

That binds societal conflict back to the fear of collective punishment: The “wrath of God,” will come when some in the society differ from the religious norms. Therefore, for many believers, they must be obeyed by everyone. So, although conflicts evolve around a number of lines and a multitude of issues, they all originate in religious norms and the attempt to enforce them in society.

To summarize the various attitudes towards atheists as analyzed based on the believers’ perspective, one has to point out that not all result in conflicts. While there are forms of distance,
exclusion, and even censorship, many believers express love and compassion for atheists. However, that often rests on the assumption that atheists are immature and in need of help from the believers who feel closer to the truth, particularly where it is codified in religious scripture. There are also intensive attempts to include atheists in the group of the believers and, hence, to expand. Together, those tendencies create ample potential for conflict, which can range from subtle differences that are engrained in language and wording to apocalyptic scenarios, including pain and suffering.

**A Grounded Theory of Anti-Atheism**

In my analysis, I relied on my data as much as possible. But, of course, also a Grounded Theory is to some extent related to the work of other scholars. In the literature exists a variety of terms for describing the way atheists or other minorities are treated, such as prejudice, discrimination, exclusion, or atheophobia. They have different meanings, but are often used unsystematically, interchangeably, and without distinction. Although these terms are irreplaceable for the analysis of the respective aspects they highlight, I would argue that none of them can fully encompass all aspects of the phenomena. It is, for example, not a prejudice that atheists do not believe in God; it is not a discrimination to dislike someone who does not share your values; and it is not an exclusion to constantly invite someone to a Bible class. Nevertheless, they are all part of the way atheists are perceived and treated in the United States. Therefore, I find that the term *anti-atheism* is the most open conceptual and terminological frame. As such, it is broad enough to include a variety of concepts taken from the quantitative studies, like “anti-atheist prejudice” (Gervais, Shariff and Norenzayan 2011), “stereotyping” (Harper 2007:544), “threats” that respondents feel because of the existence of atheists (Pickel 2013). It can also include intolerance and exclusion (Filsinger 1976; Foust 2009), “Symbolic boundaries” and “limits of religious acceptance” (Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann 2006:211), openness and the willingness to vote for an atheist (Jones and Saad 2012; Lipka 2015), discrimination (Weiler-Harwell 2011; Anti-Discrimination Support Network 2012; Cragun et al. 2012; Hammer et al. 2011), (in-)tolerance (Filsinger 1976), “anti-atheist bias” (Swan and Heesacker 2012), “perceived stigma” (Garreau, Christopher R. H. 2012), and “marginalization” (Goodman and Mueller 2009). It also can capture forms of religious nationalism, such as people who believe that the United States is a religious nation (Pew Research
ANALYZING ANTI-ATHEISM

Center 2006:5; Straughn and Feld 2010:280), conflicts between the religious and the nonreligious (Klug 2017b) and even violence and the threat thereof, as reported, for example, in Hunberger (2006:49), Hammer (2011:45), Foust (2009:23), and from the Anti-Discrimination-Support Network (2012). It is largely synonymous to “atheophobia” (Rafford 1987), but may also include cases in which anti-atheism is not based on fear and doubt but used to maintain cultural or political privilege or to justify racial dominance. With this broadened focus, the aim of this study was to show how atheists are perceived and treated in the United States. Based on data, I created a Grounded Theory of anti-atheism, in which I explore and suggest potential explanations.

This insight into the way believers perceive and treat atheists now sheds new light on the existing theories regarding the relationship between the religious and the nonreligious. First, I want to point out that in contrast to the etic attempts to define nonreligion in relation towards religion (Campbell 1971; Lee 2012b; Quack 2014), believers on the emic level ascribe atheism and nonreligion to a broad range of phenomena: from atheism in its lexical sense of not believing in God, to other religions, or to different versions of their own religion. So if we want to deal with anti-atheism, those etic attempts to define atheism and nonreligion are of limited applicability. That hints at the fact that, in order to study anti-atheism, we have to shift our attention from the nonreligious themselves to the “boundary work” (Klinkhammer 2018; Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann 2006) of the religious.

This boundary work is an important part of religious identity formation. However, it seems to be not enough to just focus on in-group favoritism and out-group derogation (like in Johnson, Rowatt and LaBouff 2012), because that would ignore a central aspect of the phenomena: That in many cases, the existence of atheists is denied. This denial often takes the form of accusing atheists of lying or pretending, or accrediting their atheism to some tragedy in their past. That way, the possibility that atheists don’t believe in God based on a rational considerations can be ruled out. On the other hand, such a rationality can also be acknowledged but devalued, for example, because it ignores the more fundamental questions of life and death. It would be too simple to just interpret this denial as an encompassing of atheists in the circle of the we, because it seems that it is more prevalent where people are actually confronted with atheists because of their numbers, their arguments, or their societal demands. Therefore, I would interpret it as a disavowal (Laplanche and Pontalis 2006:118–121) of atheists, as a defense against the doubt that their argument evokes.
ANALYZING ANTI-ATHEISM

But it did not seem to be the doubt alone that turned people into anti-atheists. Doubt can also lead to a very open attitude. Therefore, I tried out different explanations, like the deprivation of the truth claim in religion, and the dissection of religion in God and an afterlife (Adorno et al.:727–737), as well as the combination of doubt and fear (Rafford 1987). My examples showed that the insistence on the indivisibility of the religious truth claim and the belief in an afterlife can also strengthen the rejection of atheists. The most distinguished explanation for anti-atheism seemed to be the fear of the afterlife punishment. Only that danger seemed to make doubt an important catalyst for the rejection of atheists. So “the fear or hatred of atheism and atheists” (Rafford 1987:32) seemed to also be a fear of hell and damnation which the atheist seems to trigger.

Literature suggests that authoritarianism is a major factor for the development for prejudice among the religious (Hunsberger 1995), but in regard to anti-atheism I found that it is not authoritarianism alone but rather the specific way it is linked to religion which makes anti-atheism particularly salient. Where belief in God serves as the blueprint of respect for authority or where people hand themselves over to God’s authority and plan, this makes atheism particularly threatening. In addition, the idea of an omnipotent creator who punishes in the afterlife and who deserves absolute obedience may also perpetuate religious authoritarianism. This, in turn, may affect the atheists in the most pressing way, because anti-atheism can be seen as a prototype of a prescribed prejudice since to believe is the most fundamental religious norm.

Because of their nonconformism, atheists are often seen as a danger not just to the individual but to the whole community. As the separation of church and state is equated with bringing godlessness over the country, some believers fear godly punishment like in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Catastrophes, like terror attacks or school shootings, are blamed upon atheists. As people who do not follow all the norms of the omnipotent punisher, they present the ideal scapegoats (see also Douglas 1995:14–15).

Many believers entertain a Manichean worldview in which all good things in the world are accredited to God, while all bad things are accredited to humans and to nonbelievers in particular. Although many believers negate being judgmental, this goes along with a number of ascriptions to atheists, which, as we’ve seen, go as far as murdering children. As many believers report, distrust is a central topic for prejudice against atheists because atheists do not believe in after-life retribution and, therefore, are seen as devoid of a sanctioned moral framework (see also
Norenzayan 2013; Gervais, Shariff and Norenzayan 2011). Here, believers frequently ignore worldly agents of sanctioning like the state or the community. However, ascriptions towards atheists range much further and often seem to be a projection of believers own repressed desires or struggles (Adorno et al.:735). That goes as far as projecting the own claim for societal dominance onto atheists. Atheists’ demand for equal treatment is then portrayed as the oppression of believers.

Obviously that shows in the ways atheists are treated by believers as well. Some openly admit to looking down on them or to keeping their distance. But exclusion can also be less conscious, and hidden in structural mechanisms even if people do not want that. However, while there is open exclusion of atheists, they are often not excluded as people but rather because of their belief system. Oftentimes, the believers’ goal is to change their beliefs and to convert them. The missionary attempts but also the expressions of love and compassion rest on the assumption that nonbelievers are immature and need help, which in turn lifts the believer in an elevated position. But another goal is to form society according to religious norms. To that end, some even censor artistic expression. Conflicts often arise around the base of truth and the legitimate sources of knowledge, the justifications of morality, appropriate modes of human interaction, the rules of conduct, ideas about the formation and organization of the world, and the meaning of life (Klug 2017b, see also Klinkhammer, Klug and Neumaier under review). However, those problems are all based on a religious and usually Christian claim for societal dominance.
ANTI-ATHEISM IN AMERICAN HISTORY AND PRESENT

My work is about anti-atheism in the United States. Through that, I hope to explore a field which has been systematically neglected not only in research about religion but also in research about nonreligion. The relationship between religion and nonreligion is usually presented as that of nonreligion towards religion without considering the reverse, that of religion towards nonreligion (see e.g. Campbell 1971, Lee 2012b, Quack 2014). But in a society in which religion was and is a strong influence upon public and private life, and even limits legitimate expression and conduct, this religious context needs to be considered (Zuckerman 2012; Klug 2017a). Therefore, my work focusses on this missing part of the puzzle and explores the various ways in which religion affects atheists.

I have traced how the accusation of atheism was used through 400 years of American history, how this religious power structure is ingrained in language and discourse, and how atheists were excluded through legislative rulings and public opinion. And I’ve described how, despite the lack of political representation of atheists, laws that are based on religious norms apply to them nevertheless. In the sociological analysis, the focus was on the lines drawn between the in-group and the nonreligious out-group, and how that often involves the complete denial of atheists’ existence. I’ve shown that the reason for such a denial often lies in the doubt that the atheist triggers within the believer, and the fear of damnation that this might cause. In addition, some people who trust in God to help them through the difficulties of their lives, seem to be avoiding the thought that there might not be a God, and, hence, don’t want to be confronted with atheists. I outlined a variety of relationships between anti-atheist prejudice and authoritarianism and showed how religion can reproduce such authoritarian structures. When believers deal with the problem of evil and theodicy—as brought up by atheists—that often results in a Manichean worldview in which all good is credited to God and all evil is blamed upon humans in general, and atheists in particular. That atheists don’t fear afterlife punishment makes some people believe that they don’t follow any of the rules that believers are following—regardless of the fact, that
there are also other sources of morality. But ascriptions given to atheists are broader than those related to distrust, and often seem to be projections of desires that believers don’t find acceptable for themselves because they are deemed sinful. The atheist then becomes the negative pictures of one’s own belief in God, including the moral restrictions that it entails. That leads to a number of different ways of treating atheists, most of which have in common that they are based on and aimed at the perpetuation of a religious dominance in society.

But the sociological analysis does not just carry the historical overview into the present, and does not just show the private side of public discourse. The past and the present are inevitably interconnected, and many tropes and topics that my interviewees brought up exist in American discourse from the very beginning. This became apparent through the continuity in patterns, which may allow some new interpretations of historical events. It also played a role, where we find some academic scholars reproducing religious anti-atheist arguments. But to look back at the past may also help to better understand the present.

The colonization took place within the context of religious expansionism in which new people were to be proselytized. Despite being founded in the quest for religious freedom, religious delineations and othering always played a role in the New World. During colonization and slavery, the idea that the others are not believers legitimized violence, genocide, and exploitation. The colonialists often saw their mission legitimized as divine, which even included extermination of the Native population and the takeover of their land. The most iconic part of the American founding myth involves the Puritan settlers, who fled religious persecution in their countries of origin. But this experience did not keep them from persecuting religious and nonreligious dissenters themselves. Civil rights and franchise were limited to members of the churches. Expressions of atheism and religious nonconformism were threatened with heavy punishment. The accusation of atheism has been used like a “scarecrow” (Marty 2012 [1961]) against religious minorities and against those who wanted to liberate themselves from strict religious norms.

Although both the other that needs to be distinguished and the terms which were used for this “boundary work” (Klinkhammer 2018) changed over American history, the religious out-group is still often described in terms of its nonreligion, for example, when people discuss whether Islamic terrorists are atheists. Many of my interviewees, when asked about “atheists” or “people who do not believe in God,” even brought up people who worshipped their same God in a different way or in a “lukewarm” fashion. The accusation of atheism looms so powerfully because atheists
don’t just differ in regard to the details of theology or the specifics of worship, but don’t believe in God at all. That inevitably questions the religious worldview completely, and with it the American founding myth. Those “Saints” who crossed the ocean “for religions sake” (Bradford s.a.:II: 330) did that with a solid belief in God. Many lost their lives or their family. Questioning the belief in a higher being questions the higher purpose of their mission and, therefore, whether those sacrifices were necessary at all. It also questions the security and comfort that is felt through the idea of an omnipotent father figure, and the belief of my interviewees that “all things work together for good to them that love the Lord,” even when they are confronted with evil or tragedy.

Questioning and doubt have led to all kinds of progressive religious and nonreligious movements in the United States, and often were the main causes for freethought, agnosticism, or atheism (Jacoby 2005). They can lead to a curious or inquiring attitude, like that of one of my interviewee who believes in God but doesn’t “quite understand how He is.” But where combined with fear, doubt can lead to very aggressive anti-atheist or “atheophobic” reactions toward those who embody it. That seems to apply to situations in which people rely heavily on God’s help in an otherwise frightening environment, as was the case for the first settlers who set foot in the New World—and is still the case for one of my interviewees, who ignores the economic pressures of a capitalist society by joining the ministry. But it seems to apply even more so where people fear the consequences of their lack of faith, as in the theological concept in which doubt was seen as a sign of insufficient belief, and, hence, led to damnation, as Weber describes in the Protestant Ethic (Weber 2007 [1905]). So anti-atheism does not seem to be primarily “fear or hatred of atheism and atheists” (Rafford 1987:33–34), but rather that the atheist argument reminds them of the riskiness of their reliance on God in this world, or sparks the fear of damnation in the next one. Consequently, atheists in the colonies were silenced through blasphemy laws and deportation. In Massachusetts blasphemers were “punished by Imprisonment […]; by sitting in Pillory; by Whipping; boaring thorow the Tongue, with a red hot Iron.” (General Assembly of Massachusetts-Bay in New England s.a. [1697])

Nevertheless, religious freedom was an important topic for the settlers and played an important role in the fight for Independence and in the framing of the Constitution. The founders were aware “that the majority may trespass on the rights of the minority,” and “that the same authority which can establish Christianity, in exclusion of all other Religions, may establish with the same
ease any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all other Sects,” as James Madison has put it (1973 [1785]: Art. 1-3). Therefore, the Constitution explicitly states that “no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States” (Constitution of the United States 1787: Art. 6). But atheism actually played a minor role in the decision to create a secular constitution. Even the most progressive authors such as Locke or Paine—who was himself accused of atheism—expressed distrust in and contempt for atheists. Instead, the secular constitution was widely supported by the religious dissenters who felt that a strong separation between church and state was their best protection. However, that this freedom would also allow non-Christians and atheists to hold office upset many religious actors at the time. Hence, it was not a surprise that the state constitutions often granted religious freedom, but not the freedom not to be religious. That went as far as excluding those who do not believe in a “higher being” or “future state of rewards and punishments,” from holding office or witnessing in courts, as it was formulated in several state laws (e.g. Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania 2011: Art. 1, Sect. 4). This was based on the idea that there needs to be an externally set morality, that this morality comes from God, and that it is enforced through retribution in the afterlife. As atheists do not fear God and afterlife punishment, they may not have moral guidelines. As a consequence, many people distrust them (see also Gervais, Shariff and Norenzayan 2011; Norenzayan 2013).

But as historian Kenneth Sheppard has pointed out, anti-atheism targets not just the atheist argument but also the desire to live as one pleases, “in the present world without any regard for God’s judgement” (Sheppard 2015: 4). Religion always includes a set of norms upon which life should be organized; it legitimizes a worldly order that codifies rules of conduct and often oppresses human desires. Therefore, many laws were formed according to religious norms. They restricted social life, sexuality, commerce, art, and often excluded all kinds of leisurely activities on the basis that they were seen as against God’s will. As many of my interviewees have described, adhering to religious norms can be a constant struggle. For the individual being confronted with those norms, doubt and disobedience cause guilt, as it is enclosed in the omnipresent notion of “sin.” Therefore, intolerable desires are split up and projected onto the others. And as it is their faith in which the proscriptions are embedded, the ideal screen for that projection is the atheist. Like William Bradford, governor of Plymouth, criticized the inhabitants of “Merry Mount”—the “schoole of Atheisme”—for drinking, dancing, “frisking,” and “worse practices” with the Indian women (Bradford s.a.: II: 49), some of my interviewees imagine atheists
as drinking, partying, flirting, having premarital sex, or cheating. Through such a projection, atheism became an inverted picture of belief, and many of the faithful today still think of atheists as people who don’t abide by anything that is encoded in their religious norms because they don’t fear “Judgement Day.”

Early Americans saw themselves as a “citty upon a hill,” in a “covenant” with God. But in their religious thinking, God’s help and protection was bound to obedience to His laws. He had ratified His part of the covenant by bringing them over to the new continent, and now expected “strict performance of the articles contained in it.” Hence, societal rules needed to be formed according to religious norms. Those who lived as they pleased, who “embrace this present world” and follow their “carnall intentions,” cause the risk of God’s “wrathe” against the whole community (Winthrop 1996 [1630]:47). That meant that people who differed from those norms endangered not just their individual salvation but also caused fear of God’s collective punishment. That turns atheists into scapegoats. Some Christians even thought that wars were God’s punishment for the disbelief of the modern time or for liberal theology. In a resolution of the Louisville Convention in 1942, Lutheran leaders stated that “God has been left out of the lives of men,” and “therefore, mankind is reaping the harvest of its apostasy, in judgment, discipline, and vicarious suffering” (as cited in Sittser 2010:4). And today, because God was “pushed out” from schools and society, atheists are made responsible for school shootings and even for religious terror attacks. Although they are a minority in an overwhelmingly Christian country, atheists are depicted as powerful, as imposturous, or as “pushing agendas,” like one of my interviewees said.

Ecumenicalism has led to more tolerance towards other believers. But this tolerance was never extended to nonbelievers. Instead, it allowed for an alliance of different religions—like in the Evangelical Movement or in the Moral Majority—to fight the secularization of the American society and the atheists who they believe are behind it (see also 1991). But even in a religiously pluralistic environment such as interfaith groups, the nonreligious present the shared other (Klinkhammer 2018). That may explain a historical observation like that of Tocqueville that “when a politician attacks a sect, it is not a reason for even the partisans of that sect not to support him; but if he attacks all sects together, each one flees from him, and he remains alone” (Tocqueville 2010:475–476). In fact, in American history the delineation towards atheism allowed the religious factions to form a bigger and more powerful community of believers in the so called
Civil Religion (Bellah 2005 [1967]). And that in turn made it possible to equate national identity with religion. Already in the Evangelical attempts to fight infidelity in the second half of the 19th century, unbelief was portrayed as coming to the United States from the Old World and, hence, as un-American. Non-Christian dissenters like deists, unitarians and universalists, socialists, and spiritualists all were described as alien forces that would deteriorate the Christian dominance in the country. In a nation where religious dissenters settled to find religious liberty, the new liberal dissenters from Europe were perceived as a foreign threat.

That association of nonreligion with the foreign was carried through both World Wars and the Cold War. Theologians drew a line from Higher Criticism—a theology that questioned the literal truth of the Bible and focused on the historical events instead—to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, to the cruelty of the First World War. Also in the Second World War, the distinction was made between Christian America and godless Germany, despite the fact that the majority of Nazis were Christians and that they killed Jews, not Christians, on an industrial scale. Some fundamentalist Christians even explained the Holocaust as the result of the Jews’ failing to convert.

The other foreign enemies that was identified with atheism were communism and anarchism. While during the First Red Scare the ideological battle was seen as between Americanism and Bolshevism, during the Cold War the perception changed to one between Christianity and communism. But while certainly most communists are atheists, not all atheists are communists. To make being American synonymous with being Christian, or at least with being theist, symbolically excluded atheists from citizenship (Aiello 2005). During the Cold War, the national motto was changed from “E pluribus Unum” to “In God We Trust,” and the phrase “under God” was added to the Pledge of Allegiance. As had already occurred in the World Wars, such rhetoric identified atheists with the enemy, with sabotage, treason, and conspiracy.

Of course, the way atheists are treated has changed over the course of American history. Although not all believers accept the secular authority of the law as equivalent to or even above their religious one, it was no longer possible to just outlaw atheism anymore. At the height of the anti-atheist fever, the Supreme Court stepped forward with some remarkable decisions to protect their rights. Roy Torasco, an atheist who was appointed Notary Public in Maryland and refused to declare a belief in God in order to hold office, challenged the ban against atheists holding office and won. Other cases included the challenge against the use of public schools for religious
education, mandatory Bible readings in the classroom, and school prayer (United States Supreme Court 1948, 1961, 1936). Atheists and humanists who fought to push-back legal limitations often paid a high price. The reactions to those cases were grave, with the plaintiffs receiving hate mail, threats, property damage, and in some cases even violent assault. The son of America’s most outspoken atheist and claimant against school Bible readings, Madalyn Murray O’Hair, was even pushed in front of a bus (LeBeau 2003:47–48).

But when it was not possible to deny atheists existence any longer, their existence was denied. This was apparent when civil rights leader Martin Luther King said to his secular friend Stan Levison: “You believe in God, Stan. You just don’t know it.” (as cited in Jacoby 2005:331) This might have been the reason why at the symposium on the *Culture of Unbelief*, the leading sociologists of American religion, Thomas Luckmann, Robert N. Bellah, and Talcott Parsons, “each in its own way” denied “the very existence of the phenomenon under scrutiny” (Berger 1971:xiii; Marty 1971). And this reveals itself when interviewees tell me that “there’s no such thing” as an atheist and that people who “claim” atheism must be “mentally disturbed” or “lying.” So, paradoxically, while accusations and prophecies of godlessness were part of American religion and identity from the very beginning (McKnight Nichols and Mathewes 2008), it took until 2009 for a president to finally acknowledge and accept that the United States is also a nation of “nonbelievers” (Obama 2009).

Denying the existence of atheists often came with a devaluation of their argument as foolish, irrational, or ignorant. It was declared, for example by Supreme Court lawyer Philip Mauro (Mauro 2008 [1910]:91–92), as marginal, “quite out of favor,” showing “no sign of ever recovering a respectable status.” Or it was confuted in circular argumentations. When Presbyterian minister Thomas Whitelaw observed “that theoretical atheism is not extinct, even in cultured circles,” he stated, “before one can positively assert that there is no God, he must arrogate to himself the wisdom and ubiquity of God” (Whitelaw 2008 [1910]:22–23). And when my interviewees think about atheists as people who are “angry” or “pissed at God,” that shows that the thought that there is no God is avoided even at the price of inconsistency. But the devaluation of atheists’ arguments also allows for the believers to elevate themselves to a higher position, like in the image of Jesus looking down on the people from the mountainside, or my interviewee feeling closer to knowing “the truth.” That translated into a number of attitudes towards nonbelievers, all of which included this hierarchy—whether it came in the blunt form of
looking “down on them” or in the most loving and compassionate manner. Just as Evangelical preacher Dwight L. Moody said that he always felt the “deepest pity” for the “great agnostic” Robert Ingersoll after his death, I hear the echoes of this perspective in the words of many of my interviewees who feel “sorry” for atheists. They imagine them as immature, ignorant, and in desperate need of help. And of course, depicting atheists as sad and pitiful creatures then provides abundant legitimization to expand the religious in-group by proselytizing.

That religious feeling of superiority and their societal dominance were severely challenged through a number of developments. Maybe the biggest blow came from scientific findings, which contradicted literal interpretations of the Bible. When Charles Darwin found that the different species evolved through natural selection and humans were not created “in the image of God” but evolved from monkeys, that was seen as offensive, and classified as atheist. Soon it was forbidden to teach Darwin’s findings in schools. When biology teacher John Scopes taught it anyway, it led to one of the most spectacular trials in American history, and to an ongoing dispute between science and religion, which is still fought in the classrooms and in the courts.

But again, anti-atheism targeted not just teachings that contradicted religious truth claims but also behavior that violated religious norms and the societal power structure that they codified. That Leviticus prescribed taking slaves from the “heathens,” and that a minister from Maine once wrote about Ernestine Rose that he knew of “no object more deserving of contempt, loathing, and abhorrence than a female atheist” (as cited in Jacoby 2005:98) shows the intersections between religion, anti-atheism, and other power structures. The “theocracy” that Massachusetts theologian John Cotton (as cited in Cobb 1968:169) imagined, also meant the rule of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant male. Religion, either in form of its scriptures, institutions, or in the thoughts of individual believers, provided an ideological frame through which those power structures were reproduced. So, the Culture Wars did not start in the 1970s as suggested by James Davison Hunter (1991), but rather they started when norms were sanctified and declared binding for everyone. When religious activists complained that the end of daily Bible readings in public schools was “another step toward the elimination of God from all public American life” (as cited in LeBeau 2003:94), it was not their religious freedom they feared for, but their their state-supported privilege to make others adhere to their religious norms. And when my interviewees told me that atheists were “taking away” their “rights,” they were in fact speaking of their religious dominance.
The 1960s’ progress in regard to the rights of black people, women, homo- and transsexuals, as well as in regard to artistic expression, was followed by a conservative backlash. It particularly focused on matters of sexuality and the family. Gender equality, gay rights, and a woman’s right to abort were portrayed as the result of a secular conspiracy. Where people violated their religious norms and did not behave according to their religious worldview, conservative Christians—together with conservative Jews and Mormons—saw their religious dominance threatened, and hence reacted harshly towards the offenders. Those who differed were accused of godlessness, regardless of the many moderates among the believers, including Evangelicals. This has led to a societal divide into liberal and conservative camps that still exists today.

When the United States was attacked by religious radicals September 11, 2001, most reactions were themselves decidedly religious. The public mourning and the official memorial ceremonies, the speeches of George W. Bush, and even the framing of the military actions in response were presented in religious terms—as “ceremonial deism” (Weiler-Harwell 2011, Gresock 2001:578). But this not only excluded atheists symbolically from the American nation, several public speakers went as far as blaming atheists and secularists for the attack itself, because in their view the separation of church and state had caused God to mete out this punishment. In this worldview, atheists were used as scapegoats for religious violence. As Jerry Falwell said,

the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say: ‘You helped this happen.’ (as cited in Lincoln 2006:519–529)

The Islamist terror attacks of 9/11 and the right-wing Christian reactions triggered a movement that was heretofore unseen in the United States. The New Atheists did not look for a niche in a heavily Christian America, but challenged the extent of this religiosity. Like other atheists before them, they were demonized, received threats and hate mail. However, they have fostered a trend for more atheists to come out of the closet. Through those efforts, nonbelievers have become more visible as a voter group and have begun to demand political representation. In 1987, George Bush, Sr. could still state that atheists should not “be considered as citizens [or] patriots” (as cited in National Secular Society 2004). By 2016, Obama declared atheists a group in need of legal protection (see One Hundred Fourteenth Congress of the United States of America 2016:Sec. 3). However, it remains difficult for the Democratic Party to embrace atheists, as that
could alienate religious voters. Because of that, and because his own religion was frequently questioned, Obama actually relied heavily on religious rhetoric and symbolism. However, that did not “unite” the country on the basis of faith, as he had hoped. Instead, Republicans fostered the societal divide between liberals and conservatives and elected the most authoritarian president in the history of the United States: Donald Trump.

While not exactly a model of religious modesty, Trump may have appealed to those who see in health and wealth a sign of God’s grace. Together with his running mate Mike Pence, Trump promised Evangelicals the appointment of conservative Supreme Court Justices, the defunding of Planned Parenthood, the protection of people who deny gays services, and the repeal of the *Johnson Amendment*, through which the churches could expand their political power. In other words, he promised them recovery of their societal dominance—to *Make America Great Again*. With its racism, sexism, homophobia, and contempt for science, his administration stands for the repeal of all those developments that have upset the religious order. But for Trump, to keep his support despite the conflicts with the moderate factions within the Republican Party, his appeal has had to go further. His performance as a male authority figure speaks to Evangelical authoritarianism (Zuckerman 2016). As I’ve shown in my interviews, the thought of an omnipotent God that demands absolute obedience and has endless ways to punish is echoed in Trump’s authoritarian approach. Those who doubt, those who differ, and those who criticize are seen as enemies. Such a Manichean worldview reaches back to the beginnings of American history. During the Salem witch trials, Puritan minister Samuel Parris, stated, “Here are no Newters. Every one is on one side or the other.” (Parris s.a. [1692]:155) Congregationalist pastor Solomon Stoddard knew “but two sorts of men in the world, Godly and Ungodly. All ungodly men are utterly destitute of holiness; their natures are corrupted, they are servants of Satan, and live in a way of Rebellion against God.” (Stoddard s.a. [1719]:85–89) In his *Power of Positive Thinking*, Norman Vincent Peale—Trump’s favorite pastor—also promotes this idea in sentences like: “If God be for us, who can be against us?” (Peale 2015:22, emphasis as in Peale) And if my interviewees tell me that there is “no gray area” in religion, they may not desire differentiation or compromise from their political leaders, either. Furthermore, if “God allows things to happen, for reasons we don’t understand,” as one of the Trump-supporters among my interviewees told me, societal order is legitimized religiously and Trump becomes the God-chosen leader. So far, Trump has not picked atheists as scapegoats, and given his own life conduct he is unlikely to do so. But if conservative Christians—enabled by Trump—succeed in regaining power over the
whole of society, the progress that has been achieved for atheists is in danger. Admittedly, this is dystopian speculation. But recent history in the United States has shown that even the wildest guess can be trumped by the actual course of events.

Religion is not a monolithic worldview. Instead, it rests on a complex interference of individual dispositions and cultural dynamics. This can cause similarity or difference across denominational or theological lines. However, in a theist worldview the atheist will remain the ultimate outsider. It seems important to continue and expand research in the field of anti-atheism. We need more detailed historical accounts than the ones I provide in this short ride through American history, and we also need more sociological and psychological research. Qualitative analysis should inquire further into processes of delineation, identity formation, projection, and scapegoating. Furthermore, we need to address topics I unfortunately had to leave out of this analysis, such as a reconstruction of such as believers’ thoughts on an ideal society or their actual interactions with atheists. Quantitative studies should measure to what anti-atheism is common among believers, and how it correlates to other aspects of faith. Inquiries into the relationship between religion, authoritarianism, and anti-atheism as a prescribed prejudice would also yield important insights. And finally, studying the continuities of anti-atheism may offer us deeper insight into the interplay between historic and present-day dynamics.

Anti-atheism was and still is a pillar in the construction of the American identity. But America is not alone in this. Even today, there are many countries where atheism is outlawed and nonbelievers are persecuted and killed. So, this study is not meant to single out the United States, but rather to aid the fight against anti-atheism and religious persecution worldwide through a detailed examination of its mechanisms in one sociological and political arena. Academic scholarship is always interwoven in the power structure of society, be it as a challenger or as a reproduction. This was certainly the case for those who challenged religious authority by establishing scientific laws. And it reveals itself where the study of religion reproduces religious power structures. It may also be the case for pointing those structures out. I, therefore, imagine these closing paragraphs not as the end of a discussion, but rather the beginning of a new and hopefully broader one.
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Bremen, 02.07.2018.

Petra Klug