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*ATHEISTS
IN AMERICA*

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INTRODUCTION

THE OTHER CLOSET

An Introduction to Atheism and Coming Out Processes

WHAT WE “KNOW” ABOUT ATHEISM

“Unbelief is the greatest of sins.” Though most people are largely oblivious to his writings, the spirit of St. Thomas Aquinas’s words seems to have permeated the collective psyche of the American public. Almost daily, political officials and conservative news networks remind us of the “attack on Christianity” by secularists and, subsequently, the perils of losing sight of our foundation as a religious nation. However, atheists themselves have also become increasingly vocal. Controversial authors such as Daniel Dennett, Victor Stenger, Richard Dawkins, Michael Shermer, Sam Harris, Dan Barker, and the late Christopher Hitchens have all contributed to the surge of pop-atheism books published in the past five to ten years. And, in looking at book sales for these authors, it seems clear that consumers were hungry for the content they offered. At the time, the popularity of the books seemed to baffle journalists, with one candidly expressing that “secularism is suddenly hip, at least in the publishing world” and positing that the phenomenon was a backlash against the perceived rise in religious fundamentalism and crazes for pop-spirituality books.¹ Perhaps the clearest example of success is Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*; released in 2006, by 2010 the English version sold over two million copies² and remained on

the *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list for fifty-one weeks.³ In the book, Dawkins persuasively argues that God or any supernatural creator is unlikely to exist and therefore that personal belief in God is upheld only by persistent belief in the face of strong contradictory evidence, the textbook definition of delusion. Collectively, the tone of these books is assertively oppositional toward religion, claiming the alleged intellectual and moral high ground of nonbelief.

The rise of this movement within the secular community has been termed “New Atheism” and is marked by “a more militant, in-your-face kind of atheism.”⁴ The founding New Atheist authors were some of the first people truly to bring atheist discourse *out of the closet* and into mainstream discourse—indeed, they are renowned scientists, journalists, professors, and thinkers, undeniably successful and intelligent. Deftly described by Seth Andrews, an infamous atheist blogger and radio personality, these men challenged stereotypes about *who* atheists were:

In the minds of the faithful (at least here in the American Southwest), the atheist is the poster child for darkness and chaos, a rebellious, rudderless, angry, sad, pathetic malcontent who is ill-equipped to understand the God-originated concepts of joy, love, goodness, truth, family, life and death. The atheist poisons the well. The atheist is a molester of minds that children should be shielded from. The atheist lurks in the shadows of upright society, a counter-culture anomaly, a freak.⁵

In their books, lectures, and debates the founders of New Atheism generally appear composed, thoughtful, informed, and even humorous or playful—certainly not disfigured creatures of the night. With unapologetic tones, unabashed defiance, and sometimes mocking sarcasm, their words deftly undermine thousands of years of religious belief and indoctrination. But the approach of those in the New Atheist movement has not been uniformly embraced by larger atheist communities, who sometimes view such books as combative, ridiculing, counterproductive, and evangelizing.⁶

For many people, painting all religious institutions as, in Christopher Hitchens’s words, “enemies with gnarled hands who would drag us back

to the catacombs and reeking altars” is unnecessarily filled with hubris and machismo.⁷ Reactions to the New Atheist movement also highlight the imbalance of demographic representation (in terms of voice and numbers) within the community.⁸ Specifically, some individuals perceive atheist communities as exclusive clubs (for men who are white and upper middle class) that do not openly welcome women or other minority group members. Barry Kosmin, director of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture and Research at Trinity College, describes that hard-secularist positions are increasingly held by men; illustratively, the Freedom from Religion Foundation (a positive atheist group) reports that 79 percent of their members are men. Kosmin states that “a lot of women are turned off by what they call the ‘warlords of atheism’ and what they interpret to be very aggressive attitudes held by Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins and people like that.”⁹ Thus, many individuals may agree with atheist beliefs, but they do not support the dogmatic mobilization efforts and violent animus of the male leaders of New Atheist movements. Throughout *Atheists in America*, voices of atheist individuals who represent a diverse array of racial groups, socioeconomic classes, and genders are presented; their relationships to the broader atheist community and outspokenness about religion vary greatly, highlighting that New Atheists are not the rising (or sole) faces of the secular in America.

CONSPICUOUSLY UNDERSTUDIED

At this point, you may be wondering how academics, specifically social scientists, have weighed in on atheism. If you are hearing crickets, this should give you some indication of the state of thoughtful and empirically valid atheist literature within academia. An EBSCOhost search (a major search engine for academic publications) of peer-reviewed religiosity and spirituality-related (R/S) articles related to the social sciences from the last decade will yield roughly 480,000 articles. Parallel searches with atheist-related keywords will yield about 1,200 articles. Though academic literature on R/S beliefs is vast and growing, few studies include meaningful discussion of nonbelievers and

atheist individuals, and the few articles that include atheism do not address nonbelief as a valid diversity issue.¹⁰

One major theme within recent R/S research is to explore the links of belief with the promotion of well-being, including mental health, cancer, HIV, heart conditions, and many other physical ailments.¹¹ However, Frederick Kier and Donna Davenport note that “if one subscribes unthinkingly to the theory that those who are religious are healthy, it is not a far stretch for one to flip this logic into a theory that those who are unreligious are unhealthy, sick, or otherwise impaired.”¹² As only a handful of studies have begun to explore the well-being of nonreligious individuals, society as a whole may take on this potentially damaging view of atheists.

The conspicuous gap in academic research regarding atheism may be linked to scholars’ focusing their attention on topics that are “more publishable”—in short, those that are politically correct and unlikely to draw controversy. Within the currently religious and conservative sociopolitical climate of the United States, atheism is a contentious topic.¹³ However, the fundamental hesitancy of researchers to address atheist issues in the social sciences is growing increasingly problematic. Some estimates suggest that there are between 500 and 750 million atheists, agnostics, and nonbelievers worldwide. In the United States, the number of atheist-identified people are rising;¹⁴ 4 to 15 percent of individuals in the United States identify as atheist,¹⁵ which translates to a minority group comparable in size to LGBTQ (roughly 4 to 10 percent),¹⁶ African American, and Asian American populations in the United States (roughly 13 percent and 5 percent, respectively).¹⁷ In both numbers and decibel level of protests, atheists are rapidly becoming a minority group that demands scholarly attention.

ATHEISM: IDENTITY, RELIGION, OR PHILOSOPHY?

It should be noted that estimates of the rates of atheist identification are notoriously unclear as the “precise definition of ‘atheism’ is both a vexed and vexatious issue.”¹⁸ There remains no clear consensus on who atheists are and

what they believe (or, rather, don't believe). Recent literature presents non-belief as a spectrum that ranges from strong atheism to weak atheism.¹⁹ Specifically, "a principled and informed decision to reject belief in God" or gods would be considered strong atheism²⁰ whereas someone who lacks a strong belief in or is unsure of the existence of God/gods (an agnostic) would be considered a weak atheist.²¹

Beyond a lack of consensus about *what* atheists believe, debates about what it *means* to call oneself an atheist are rampant. Is atheism an identity in the same way that being a woman, a Methodist, or an Asian American is an identity? Is atheism a part of one's core self or simply a signifier of what a person does *not* believe? And what about the differences among New Atheists, humanists, and people who just want to wax poetic about social justice and secularism without a label?

NEW ATHEISTS

Most historians trace the birth of the New Atheist movement to September 11, 2001, and the acts of terror that day. While nonbelievers and secular humanists had been present in the media for years, they typically operated on the defensive (e.g., fighting for rights when infringed upon) and not the offensive (e.g., openly attacking and challenging the sanity of religious belief). Dale McGowan describes how many atheists felt a collective sense of exasperation with the notions that the only acceptable "American" response to religious-based terrorist attacks was for citizens to pray, strengthen faith-based initiatives, and "crusade" against those who committed the crime. Using religious belief to fight crimes that were motivated by religion felt counterintuitive, but what felt even more upsetting to atheists was blaming the terrorism on the "secularization" of America. Enraged, Richard Dawkins released an essay four days after the attack to "make the case that religion was an 'elephant in the room' that everybody was too polite to talk about, and that religion wasn't just incidentally involved but had played an essential, indispensable part in the tragedy—the tragedy that literally *couldn't have happened without it*."²² He went on to clarify that he was motivated by a deep sense of anger and grief that, within the United

States, we maintained a “hands off knocking religion” respectfulness and even encouraged mourners from incompatible religious backgrounds to pray together without facing the devastation and murder enacted *through* faith on 9/11.

Dawkins was later joined by the writers and thinkers Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens, to form the (tongue-in-cheek) Four Horsemen of New Atheism. Victor Stenger, a physicist and proponent of New Atheism writes:

Perhaps the most unique position of New Atheism is that faith, which is belief without supportive evidence, should not be given the respect, even deference, it obtains in modern society. Faith is always foolish and leads to the many evils of society. The theist argument that science and reason are also based in faith is specious. Faith is belief in the absence of supportive evidence. Science is belief in the presence of supportive evidence.²³

This view, shared by Stenger and other New Atheists, has been dubbed “scientism” by some critics of the movement (e.g., Massimo Pigliucci) and described as an “unrealistic fixation” on empirical facts and data to dictate morals and serve as an antidote to supernatural beliefs. In this light, science becomes a replacement faith that is forcefully defended with the same dogma and zeal as religion. In his book *The New Atheism*, Stenger provides an interesting rebuttal to such criticisms.

According to New Atheists, people around the world need to be released from the spell of religion and start living thoughtful and authentic lives. The Four Horsemen and others point to events such as parents’ belief in faith healing leading to the death of their kids (e.g., the recent case of seven-month-old Brandon Schaibe, who got a minor rash and died because his parents refused to treat him with antibiotics and instead prayed)²⁴ and question how society reached a point where this level of “tolerance” of unscientific and dangerous beliefs became acceptable. The New Atheists have organized rallies, coming out campaigns, and aggressive billboard advertisements and, for the first time in atheist history, have actively sought to recruit fellow

nonbelievers to “leave the closet” and join in the fight to immunize humanity against the God virus.²⁵

(SECULAR) HUMANISTS

While the term “humanism” may have a relatively brief history, the tradition dates back to the ancient Greeks. It died down during the height of Christianity and was revived during the Renaissance. Humanism is not a religious orientation but instead an ethical lens from which a person is responsible for choosing her own destiny while living considerably toward others. A primary goal of humanism is to be intentional and thoughtful when enacting values and goals. By definition, humanism is disinterested in issues of the supernatural or an afterlife. As eloquently stated by the philosopher A. C. Grayling: “Humanism is the concern to draw the best from, and make the best of, human life in the span of a human lifetime, in the real world, and in sensible accord with the facts of humanity that are shaped and constrained by the world. This entails that humanism rejects religious claims about the source of morality and value.”²⁶

In contrast to New Atheists, humanists do not take an oppositional stance against religion; rather, they often choose to downplay differences between believers and nonbelievers, working for the greater good for all of humankind. In 2007, the Harvard Humanist Chaplaincy hosted an event called “The New Humanism” (a direct riff off of New Atheism) to set goals and give a name to the growing population within the secular community that was discontent with the aggressive approach of the Four Horsemen. New Humanism aims to be sympathetic and tolerant while acknowledging the human condition; illustratively, a primary mantra within the movement is *do good and be good . . . without god*. A flurry of New Humanist books have been published since 2007, some of which have been met with disdain by New Atheists for seeming apologetic, eager to please, or Pollyannaish. Some of this discontentment may be in reaction to the impulse that some atheists have to go “above and beyond” (in terms of community service, helpfulness, and kindness) in order to convince believers that they are not only moral but super-moral. Such pressure to be a model minority is not foreign within

identity discourses.²⁷ However, according to New Atheists, all atheists have a responsibility to speak out against religion, not simply “do good” and let religion continue to “do bad.”

There is a longstanding tradition of African American humanist thought that has tended to be more realistic and critical of human nature. From this perspective, humanism is not just about “doing good” but also about being aware of the power some groups have to inflict harm. Anthony Pinn posits that black *nontheist humanism* puts history, social justice, and responsibility at the forefront of its identity, as it recognizes both the potential and limits of humanity—the ability to do both great harm and great good. He writes:

African American nontheistic humanist ethics involves proper action and behavior in the context of concrete and historically arranged life. As such, it concerns a wrestling over both language and materiality. In wrestling over language, African American humanist ethics exposes the fragility of discursive constructions that oppress—exposing them as nonessential structures of meaning that can be challenged. With respect to materiality, this ethical platform concerns itself with the promotion of more fulfilling and free modalities of our occupation of space and time. This ethical system recognizes that the battle takes place from within systems that we resist, but also support as embodied selves.²⁸

Finally, some nonbelievers have made it their focus to centralize humanistic values within politics and government. The social philosopher Austin Dacey argues for a revival of secular liberalism—which is not a religion but an intellectual and political movement that puts freedom of individuals before God or government and seeks sources of meaning, morality, and community outside of organized religion. He laments that both *secular* and *liberal* have become dirty words in the United States, and thus, the few individuals who push back against religiosity in government are labeled as militant or fundamentalist atheists.²⁹ Dacey purports that beliefs (religious, atheist, or blasphemous) should not be relegated to the private sphere but instead held up to conscious thought and public appraisal to assess their strengths, weaknesses, and relevance. Through this open con-

versation and appraisal, the understanding and creation of greater good may be born. He writes:

Secular ethics begins with the reality of love, the desire for the good of the other for the sake of the other. Our good or well-being is not just what we happen to want, but what we would want if we knew what we were doing. . . . Conscience is what unites thinking persons and free peoples across ethnic, national, and creedal lines, and in its unfolding through public conversation, our moral lives are measured out. Conscience cannot be found in duty to God, for it is conscience that must judge where one's duty lies, and so the faithful cannot hold a monopoly on morality.³⁰

Though distinct in some ways, an overarching theme of New Atheism, humanism, and other forms of secular ethics is that people are capable of living full, content, and socially just lives without the guiding hand of God or the proscriptive tenets of religious faith. For some, atheism may be a cherished personal identity, readily disclosed and fought for. For others, it may be a lens through which to view the world or simply a philosophical stance about morality and politics.

SO, JUST WHO ARE THE ATHEISTS?

DEMOGRAPHICS

In the United States, several demographic characteristics of atheists emerge: they tend to reside in the Northeast or West and are well educated, politically liberal or independent, and more likely to identify as men and Caucasian.³¹ This means that studies find almost unanimously that atheist identification is less common for women and for people of color and that levels of religious involvement are higher for these groups.³² Religiosity may provide solace from feelings of frustration and anxiety linked with a marginalized position in a society in which sexism and racism is rampant. Indeed, as discussed further in chapter 2, many studies have found that individuals from socially oppressed

groups use their religious communities as systems of support in dealing with a “one down” position in the world.³³ Reports of the demographic composition of atheist populations routinely show that atheists tend to have privileged identity statuses in society (i.e., well-educated white men of higher socioeconomic status). Therefore, occupying these privileged positions may reflect the subsequent lack of a “need” to use religious beliefs, communities, or organizations as buffers against oppression.

However, reasons for demographic disparities among atheists may be more complex. Prominent African American humanist thinkers (e.g., Sikivu Hutchinson, Donald Barbera) critique leaders of the New Atheist movement for marginalizing atheist women and people of color. Indeed, the founding Four Horsemen (Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, Hitchens) are all older, privileged, white men. The feminist and atheist blogger Greta Christina presents a call to arms against the whitewashed sexism of the atheist movement:

When we say things like, “Sure our movement is mostly white and male—but that’s not our problem . . .” What we’re really saying is, “White male atheists are the real atheists. White male atheists are the ones who count. The reason white men stay in religion, or have a hard time coming out as atheists—those are the real reasons, the ones we should be addressing. Women and people of color—they’re special, extra, other. We shouldn’t have to change our behavior to include them in the movement. This should be a One Size Fits All movement—a size that fits white men.”³⁴

Drawing from work by Hutchinson—acknowledging that organized religions have largely been “bulwarks” for institutionalized sexism, racism, and heterosexism—it seems evident that more women, people of color, and LGBTQ individuals would join atheist movements if they felt more represented and included in the dominant discourse. Illustratively, even as far back as 1852, Frederick Douglass criticized the hypocrisy and complicity of the faithful in the face of slavery during a fiery speech in New York:

The church of this country is not only indifferent to the wrongs of the slave, it actually takes sides with the oppressors. It has made itself the bul-

wark of American slavery, and the shield of American slave hunters. Many of its most eloquent Divines, who stand as the very lights of the church, have shamelessly given the sanction of religion and the Bible to the whole slave system . . . and this horrible blasphemy is palmed off upon the world for Christianity! For my part, I would say, welcome infidelity! welcome atheism! welcome anything! in preference to the gospel, as preached by those Divines! They convert the very name of religion into an engine of tyranny, and barbarous cruelty, and serve to confirm more infidels, in this age, than all the infidel writings of Thomas Paine, Voltaire, and Bolingbroke, put together, have done.³⁵

Clearly, atheism is not an identity that historically, or presently, belongs to white men.

DECONVERSION

In attempting to explain *who* atheists are, it is also important to address what they are not. Unfortunately, there are no firm national statistics that capture the percentage of atheists who were “born without belief” (or, for whatever reason, for whom religion did not stick during their upbringing) versus those who “deconverted” from a religious belief system later in life. It is also unclear if atheists are typically apostates from some faiths more than others, though a small study by Hunsberger and Altemeyer did find that 63 percent of forty-six atheists sampled were originally Catholic.³⁶

John D. Barbour describes religious deconversion as a metaphor for radical personal transformation; specifically, it is “the metaphor in Western culture for analogous experience of change involving radical doubt, moral revulsion from a way of life, emotional upheaval, and rejection of a community.”³⁷ While not necessarily as devastating or dramatic as described by Barbour, deconversion involves the complicated process of “becoming an ex” and leaving a role that you previously knew. Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh posited that there may be a number of stages to exiting religious roles, including experiencing doubts, seeking alternative beliefs, experiencing a turning point, and creating a new role as an ex.³⁸ It should be noted that

there are many forms of deconversion, but the focus of this book is on *secularizing exits*, in which a person becomes a nonbeliever and nonreligious (as opposed to switching religions or becoming privately faithful but no longer attending formal services).³⁹ Research by Heinz Streib and his colleagues finds that a majority of individuals deconvert by early adulthood (around thirty) and—despite the frequent cinematographic portrayal of sudden deconversions caused by trauma or crisis (e.g., the father who angrily swears off God by his dying son’s bedside)—almost all deconversions are painstakingly thoughtful and gradual.

As I explore further in chapter 1, reasons for deconversion vary across several general themes. In Hunsburger and Altemeyer’s study of atheism, parents reported that they stopped taking their children to religious services for several reasons, most commonly “as I grew up, I saw a lot of hypocrisy in the people in my religion”; “church was boring. I wanted to do other things with my time”; and “in my youth, if you did not go to church, pray, etc. people thought there was something wrong with you. It’s not like that anymore.” However, it does not mean a family is atheist or agnostic if it stops participating in religious services. To flesh out the “roots” of deconversion more deeply, the researchers interviewed twenty active atheists from nonreligious backgrounds and twenty from religious upbringings. Those from nonreligious upbringings typically reported that faith was never really emphasized in their homes, so when they were exposed to scripture or religious people, the practices seemed bizarre and filled with contradiction. Individuals from religious upbringings explained that social causes—such as the treatment of women and LGBTQ people—or learning about the universe, science, and other cultures made their faith-based beliefs seem preposterous and impossible to maintain. Another of trigger for deconversion is a growing sense of skepticism or incredulity about the claims made within religious scriptures. With humor, Seth Andrews describes his reaction to rereading the story of Noah’s Ark as an adult with a more objective lens:

How did a 600-year-old man build a stadium-sized boat with only felled trees and pitch? How did Noah fit millions of animal species onto the

ark? What about the dinosaurs? How did Noah accommodate the specialized animal diets like bamboo shoots for the giant pandas, meat for the carnivores, plants for the herbivores, etc.? Where was the food stored and how was it kept from spoiling? How did eight ancient humans shovel tons of daily animal waste out of a 450-foot-long boat with a single window?⁴⁰

Despite the rising doubt that many individuals begin to feel about their faiths, deconversion continues to be a slow and painstaking process for many people because of the guilt they feel for questioning their family's belief system and fear of what could potentially happen to them (shunned by family and friends, smited by God if he is real). Though what often shines through deconversion narratives, once the dust settles and atheists begin to feel firmer in their nonbelief, is feelings of freedom. In an impassioned 1889 lecture, "Why I Am Agnostic," Robert Green Ingersoll—the Illinois lawyer, Civil War veteran, and abolitionist—highlights the joys of religious deconversion: "When I became convinced that the Universe is natural and that all the ghosts and gods are myths, there entered into my brain, into my soul, into every drop of my blood, the sense, the feeling, the joy of freedom. The walls of my prison crumbled and fell, the dungeon was flooded with light, and all the bolts, and bars, and manacles became dust. I was no longer a servant, a serf or a slave."⁴¹

PERSONALITY

Finally, the few studies that have examined personality traits of atheist people tend to find that they are more open, nondogmatic, feminist, tolerant of ambiguity (Hunsberger and Altemeyer), independent (Argyle), and introverted (Bainbridge) compared to religious individuals.⁴² Mostly, these studies suggest that atheist people are a less hazardous and deviant group than otherwise suspected. While scant, this available research suggests that atheists constitute a distinct portion of the U.S. population, and the experience of being a nonbeliever in a predominately Christian nation is likely laden with unique challenges.

MUCH ADO ABOUT NO BELIEF: ATTITUDES TOWARD ATHEISTS IN THE UNITED STATES

Among developed nations, the United States is the most religious.⁴³ Beliefs and practices enacted through religion or spirituality are frequently credited as uniting forces for people in the United States,⁴⁴ and in recent years, even the historic divisions among religious sects have been dissolving steadily, blurring boundaries of belief and communities of worship.⁴⁵ However, research suggests that this notable decrease in sectarianism and increase in overall tolerance of other religions is not extended to atheists. To put it mildly, attitudes toward atheists are wary and unaffirming. Survey data consistently find that atheists are regarded as “more troubling” than other groups of individuals on a long list of historically oppressed populations, including Muslim, African American, LGBTQ, and Jewish people.⁴⁶ Beyond this, national opinion polls from past and current decades consistently paint Americans as fearful or even disgusted by atheists.⁴⁷ As a clear example of this, a 2006 Gallup Poll found that 84 percent of Americans surveyed agreed that “America is not ready for an atheist president.”⁴⁸ This phobia has been termed *atheophobia* and is defined as “the fear and loathing of atheists that permeate American culture.”⁴⁹ Such attitudes that atheists are immoral, untrustworthy, or to be feared are ironic, given statistics on incarcerated populations in the United States. Upon entering prison, new inmates are asked for their religious affiliations; data suggest that most religious groups have about the same percentage of members in prison as in the general population, with one marked and hugely underrepresented group. As Dale McGowan humorously puts it:

About five percent of Americans identify not just as nonreligious but specifically as atheist. But only 0.09 percent of the federal prison population identifies as atheist—50 times fewer than would be expected. . . . I don’t think this is because the legal system has a crush on atheists. Neither do I think it means atheists are necessarily more virtuous. But at the very least, it should give pause to those who think they’re *less* virtuous.⁵⁰

The prevalence of these atheophobic and negative attitudes shapes the experiences of atheist people. Not surprisingly, atheist individuals report having experienced significant discrimination in schools, at their places of employment, within the legal system, and in many other settings.⁵¹ However, recourse against discrimination is limited and often social suicide. As Dacey describes, there is a vast history of nonbelievers being punished for speaking out against religion or pointing out violations in the civil liberties of atheists perpetrated by faith-based groups.⁵² This hypervigilance for and defense against “perceived blasphemers” by religious groups aims to silence atheists and send the message that all belief systems are respected *except* nonbelief. A recent example is the 2010 case of Jessica Ahlquist, who spoke out against the prominent display of the Lord’s Prayer in a public Rhode Island high school. She explained that as an atheist, the banner made her feel that she didn’t belong in the school and that it was a clear violation of the constitutional ban on teacher-led prayer in schools. Though in 2012 the court finally ruled that the prayer had to be removed, Jessica has already received violent threats, been refused service by local businesses, and had a state representative publicly call her an “evil little thing” on local radio.⁵³

Antiatheist discrimination has persisted for centuries. The poet Percy Shelley was kicked out of Oxford University in 1811 for expressing atheist views, and Charles Bradlaugh was removed from his seat in Parliament for refusing to swear a religious oath. In the United States, the orator and former Illinois attorney general Robert Green Ingersoll was urged by the Republican Party to run for governor in the late 1800s but pressured to hide his agnosticism. When he refused to hide his beliefs, he was deemed unelectable.⁵⁴ Since Ingersoll’s time, only two U.S. congressmembers, Pete Stark (a democratic member of the House of Representatives from 1973 to 2013) and Kyrsten Sinema (an Arizona representative from 2005 to 2011), have been out as atheists. Though freedom of religion and speech remain protected rights in the United States, constitutional provisions bar atheists from public office in seven states.⁵⁵ The constitution of the state of Mississippi (Article 14, Section 265) states: “No person who denies the existence of a Supreme Being shall hold any office in this state.” Arkansas even has a law that bars atheists from testifying as witnesses in trials.⁵⁶ Findings

like these suggest atheists are a marginalized minority group within the United States.

Though developed and validated with other marginalized groups, decades of scholarship on minority stress demonstrate that there are physical and psychological consequences linked with identifying as a member of a socially marginalized group.⁵⁷ In short, experiences of discrimination and stigma may lead to increased psychological distress and physical health problems. It follows that, similar to other stigmatized groups, the marginalization experienced by atheists may also translate to higher levels of identity-related stress. The prejudice and social stress associated with openly being atheist may pose a serious threat to an individual's well-being. Therefore, the hesitancy to include people who identify as atheist in the broader multicultural and social justice discourse is puzzling and troubling.⁵⁸

WHAT'S THIS ABOUT CLOSETING?

In the autumn of 2011, a *New York Times* article began with the bold statement, “Ronelle Adams came out to his mother twice, first about his homosexuality, and then about his atheism”⁵⁹—a sure indication that viewing atheist identity as parallel to other marginalized identities had permeated mainstream identity discourse. Even more recently, following the devastating tornado that hit Oklahoma in May 2013, the mainstream media was flabbergasted by an unexpected coming out during an interview. Standing in the rubble of her home, the tornado victim and young mother Rebecca Vitsmun was asked by CNN's correspondent Wolf Blitzer if she “thanked the Lord” for her last-minute decision to leave town and avoid the tornado that would have surely killed her family. Rebecca, visibly flustered, replied “I . . . I . . . I'm actually an atheist . . . We are here and you know, I don't blame anybody for thanking the Lord.” This simple disclosure went viral online and caused widespread, unbridled joy among the unbelieving community. The American Humanist Association donated \$10,000 to Rebecca and her family to help with their recovery, and the executive director of AHA released the following statement: “Rebecca Vitsmun's courage to speak forthrightly about her atheism inspired

humanists and others who are good without a god across the country to help her through this difficult time. . . . Natural disasters are a product of our environment, not supernatural forces, and we have a responsibility to help those affected by them.”⁶⁰ As you can imagine, if Rebecca would have replied, “yes, we do thank the Lord because we’re Baptist,” the brief news clip would have gone unnoticed.

Perhaps the most touching outcome of this story was the outpouring of support from the atheist community. An Indiegogo fundraising campaign was started for Rebecca to help defray the significant costs of rebuilding her home; within seventeen hours the website had reached its fundraising goal of \$50,000, and by the third day, over \$100,000 had been raised.⁶¹ Reactions to this interview highlight just how taboo and rare coming out as atheist remains in the United States and how thrilled (and generous) atheists become when they hear coming out stories.

Unsurprisingly, some academics, activists, and scholars have begun to draw communalities between LGBTQ people and atheists, notably, that both may “closet” or choose to conceal their identities as members of stigmatized groups.⁶² While using models of LGBTQ development to inform studies about atheist identity development may be a useful first step in furthering our understanding of the coming out process, we should be mindful of notable differences between the two groups. First, to move from a heterosexual identity to a gay or lesbian identity typically means the beginning of romantic relationships that are structured differently than previous relationships (e.g., having same-gender romantic partners as opposed to other-gender partners). Moving from religious to atheist may mean that one will stop going to church or praying, but nonbelief does not necessitate additive or visible behavioral changes. Requirements of being “out as atheist” do not include wearing a scarlet letter or snoring loudly in church. Further, copious bodies of research suggest that many LGBTQ people face near-daily threats of violence and discrimination because of their sexual orientations or gender identities.⁶³ While prejudice toward atheists certainly exists,⁶⁴ the intensity of such experience appears to be muted, comparatively.

However, similarities between the two groups do exist. As with LGBTQ identities, atheism is considered a marginalized identity, and to be nonreli-

gious in most Western cultures relegates a person to a minority status associated with oppression and prejudice.⁶⁵ Discussed by Cimino and Smith, the practice of coming out as atheist has never been a matter of publicly identifying as a nonbeliever along a well-worn or legitimate path.⁶⁶ Instead, coming out involves emerging from invisibility to claim a personal and social identity that carries deeply laden stigma. There are remarkably few examples of openly atheist politicians, media figures, or celebrities—leaving nonbelieving individuals little opportunity to model their coming out process on the experiences of others. Recent calls from leaders in the New Atheist movement have encouraged atheist people to come out of the closet and be proudly identified as apostates.⁶⁷ A primary example of this is the Out Campaign website, sponsored by Richard Dawkins, which encourages atheists to disclose their identities. However, not all atheists are supportive of this zealous movement to drag each other out of the proverbial closet and join the war against believers.⁶⁸ As with coming out as LGBTQ, there are very real risks—job loss, trouble adopting children, child custody battles, and social exclusion—of outing oneself as atheist in some regions of the United States.⁶⁹ Atheist individuals should use caution and assess the safety of their environment before proudly proclaiming godlessness from the rooftops.⁷⁰

As described by Thomas Linneman and Margaret Clendenen, there are some equivalent patterns in the coming out journeys for LGBTQ and atheist individuals.⁷¹ Notably, as with minority sexual identities, an individual's atheism is not readily visible (as gender or racial minority status may be) and requires a formal disclosure by the atheist person to be recognized by others. Depending on the perceived open-mindedness or sociopolitical climate in which an atheist person resides, he may employ a variety of identity-management strategies. Though currently discussed within LGBTQ literature, these techniques may be used by nonbelievers, too. Extending the theoretical work of Scott Button, atheists may *counterfeit*, meaning actively construct a false religious identity by continuing to attend church, pray, wear a cross or Star of David, or engage in spiritual activities; *avoid*, or continuously self-edit and provide half-truths through leaving the room when topics related to faith arise, verbally dodging religious conversation, or saying vague statements such as “I’m not very religious”; or (3) *integrate*, wherein the atheist

person is open about her identity and manages whatever reactions arise from this disclosure.⁷²

Unfortunately, once a person reveals having an atheist (or LGBTQ) identity, other people are likely to react to these identities as if they are master statuses that dictate all aspects of the individual's behavior. As posited by Siner, coming into an atheist identity requires people to undergo simultaneous challenges to development: figuring out, first, how to define their own faith (or lack of faith) and, second, how to establish connections with a particular faith group.⁷³ Like LGBTQ identities, atheist identity development exists in both internal (personal, emotional, spiritual) contexts and external (social, community, familial) contexts. Specifically, Siner draws from earlier models of lesbian and gay identity development and overlays this framework to create a four-stage model for individuals who come out as atheist from religious backgrounds:

1. Awareness: Recognition that you are different from others if you are a nonbeliever and that other atheist people exist
2. Exploration: Figuring out what it means to be a nonbeliever; deciding if you would like membership in an atheist community
3. Deepening/Commitment: Learning more about and feeling more self-fulfilled by expressions of atheism; actively participating in atheist groups or communities
4. Internalization/Synthesis: Atheist beliefs begin to interact with all dimensions of identity; individuals identify as a member of the atheist community across all life contexts

This model of identity development was an important first step in exploring patterns of atheist identity development and coming out. However, additional exploration of how real-life coming out experiences of atheist people fit (or do not fit) this model is important. Additionally, it is important to note that some atheist people never have a formal coming out. In more liberal regions of the world where atheists are a less stigmatized social group, there may be no need for processes of self-discovery, exploration, or commitment to atheist activism. Finally, "coming out of the closet" and "becoming" atheist may not be relatable

perspectives for all atheists. Specifically, some people may view their atheism as a philosophical position rather than a social identity. Some secular humanists likely view atheism as a lens from which to view the world, not a core belief system or replacement religion. Identity politics discourses (such as queer theory and critical race theory) highlight that concrete identities and labels can obscure and negate the fluidity of lived experiences for some individuals.

WHY KEEP READING?

While acknowledging the potential for major differences in coming out experiences, *Atheists in America* will shed light on shared themes in this process. Specifically, through a national call for submissions, this book garnered personal narratives from twenty-seven people from across the United States who identify as atheist. These authors represent a wide range of ages, races and ethnicities, sexual orientations, gender identities, and socioeconomic statuses. The contributors to this volume share poignant, witty, awkward, and sometimes heart-wrenching accounts of their experiences of being nonbelievers across various sectors of life. As such, the chapters (and narratives contained within each chapter) address the following topics: religious deconversion, culture, LGBTQ issues, romantic relationships, parenting and family concerns, friends and community, workplace dynamics, and aging.

Across chapters, several themes emerge in the narratives. First, many of the authors describe their process of coming into an atheist identity as gradual. Often, it occurred after years of internal strife, sadness, fear, and confusion. Several authors mention that they identified—as an informal stepping stone in their coming out—as unsure or agnostic before embracing atheism. For some, this was a version of Pascal’s Wager (e.g., “I can’t be fully atheist just in case God is real”); for others, it was meant to lessen the blow of their unbelief to religious friends, family, and colleagues. The pull of social justice issues was a strong pressure for many authors to deconvert. Disillusionment with their religions’ stances on women’s issues, LGBTQ rights, race, or politics started a cycle of self-examination that was hard to reverse. And, ironically, for many

authors it was deep study of religious scripture that shaped their decisions to reject faith.

While the vast majority of authors did deconvert, a few contributors were raised in atheist families and never held religious beliefs. Interestingly—whether deconverted or “always atheist”—all narratives depict some form of hardship or struggle to navigate core life experiences (e.g., finding a romantic partner, raising kids, making friends) as a direct result of being atheist. Even though the authors themselves were settled in their nonbelief, the religious climate of the United States triggered interpersonal strife and awkwardness. The authors typically describe employing a wide variety of identity-management techniques (e.g., concealing or hiding their atheism, avoiding discussion of faith or religion) when interacting with others socially, out of fear of rejection or offending with their nonbelief. The narratives frequently capture a deep yearning for community, connection, and fellowship that is often out of reach for atheist people. Astoundingly, even in the most liberal cities in the country (e.g., New York) and in occupations perceived to be the most open-minded and progressive (e.g., university professor) authors *still* reported that they experienced stigma for being open about their atheism. The book, therefore, begins to debunk the myth that atheophobia is restricted only to the Bible Belt.

However, it would be remiss to paint these narratives solely as stories of marginalization, isolation, and loss. Overwhelmingly, the authors express sheer joy for being able to live authentically, openly, and as the sole masters of their destiny. While the road to coming out may have been challenging, it is clear that there are no regrets for any of the authors. Chris, a seventy-seven-year-old woman from the Gulf Coast, eloquently captures this spirit with her closing remark: “I am now in the last quarter of my existence. Looking back on a good and productive life, I’m glad I’ve lived it with integrity and without God.” Taken together, *Atheists in America* is a collection of stories about non-conformists openly declaring themselves as unbelievers against the religious grain of the United States.