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### Authors

Blankholm, Joseph

Cragun, Ryan

Suárez, Abraham Hawley

et al.

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# Exclusive Empiricism and Mortal Finitude: What “Atheist” and “Agnostic” Really Mean<sup>1</sup>

## Authors:

Joseph Blankholm<sup>2</sup>

Ryan Cragun<sup>3</sup>

Abraham Hawley Suárez<sup>4</sup>

Shakir Stephen<sup>5</sup>

## Corresponding author:

Joseph Blankholm

Associate Professor

Department of Religious Studies

University of California

Santa Barbara, CA 93106

blankholm@ucsb.edu

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## ABSTRACT

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<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, Religious Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara

<sup>3</sup> Professor, Sociology, University of Tampa

<sup>4</sup> PhD Student, Religious Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara

<sup>5</sup> PhD Student, Religious Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara

This essay argues that “atheist” and “agnostic” are not merely negative labels that indicate a person lacks belief in God or is not religious. Relying on two new surveys, we demonstrate that Americans who identify as “atheist” or “agnostic” are exclusive empiricists who trust science as a way of knowing the world and do not trust scripture or its divine inspiration. They also believe in mortal finitude, i.e., that death marks the final end of an individual’s life. Our findings show that scholars should interpret a respondent’s self-identification as “atheist” or “agnostic” to indicate adherence to a belief system that includes exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude rather than treat these labels as indicating far narrower statements about (non)belief in the existence of gods.

## INTRODUCTION

“Atheist” and “agnostic” are popular and useful self-identifiers. According to their dictionary definitions, they express that a person does not believe in God, that a person is unsure whether they believe in God, or that the existence of God cannot be known for certain. Despite their popularity and usefulness, these labels’ negativity makes them ambiguous. “Atheism” seems to tell researchers only what people do *not* believe about the existence of a god or gods. “Agnosticism” is more ambiguous because it seems to indicate only *uncertainty* about what people believe or do *not* believe.

The ambiguity of these labels is an old problem. In ancient Rome, the early Christians called the polytheistic Romans “atheists” for denying their god, and the Romans called the early Christians “atheists” for denying their gods (Whitmarsh 2016). Today, when asking about a person’s “present religion,” surveys often add “atheist” and “agnostic” alongside common religious self-identifiers like Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim (see, for example, Pew

Research Center 2015). This practice is odd as neither atheist nor agnostic are religious affiliations; nor are they the inverse or absence of a religious affiliation (see Cragun 2019). Despite the irony, “nonreligious” has increasingly become an identity marker (Cragun and McCaffree 2021). Like “nonreligious,” “atheist” and “agnostic” can be used to express a lack of religious affiliation as much as nonbelief (Cragun et al. 2012; Edgell et al. 2006; Edgell et al. 2016).

In all these uses, “atheist” and “agnostic” do not appear to indicate any positive traits of those who identify with them. They are peculiar terms that are unlike the more traditional religious self-identifiers alongside which they often appear. “Atheist” and “agnostic” can be awkward or even stigmatizing labels for the everyday people who adopt them (Abbott et al. 2022; Edgell et al. 2017; Frost et al. 2023), and their meanings are a common source of debate among nonbelievers (Blankholm 2022). They also pose serious challenges for researchers trying to understand secularization because their mere negativity implies nihilism (Speed et al. 2018), social isolation (Hunter 2010), and moral decline (Swan and Heesacker 2012).

But what if identifying as “atheist” or “agnostic” indicated more than simply what a person does *not* believe? We argue in this essay that Americans who report their religious affiliation as “atheist” or “agnostic” or who identify as such on surveys usually share a highly specific set of beliefs with one another. We show that although nearly everyone is an atheist to someone’s god or gods, those who identify as “atheist” or “agnostic” tend to agree on fundamental questions like how best to know reality and what happens to us when we die. The beliefs that nonbelievers share are aspects of what we might call a belief system or a worldview (see Taves 2020, but also Weir 2018). Atheists and agnostics do not always agree on all of the

particulars of this belief system, even as they adhere consistently to some of its fundamental tenets, especially those concerning epistemology.

To demonstrate that atheists and agnostics share a belief system, we rely on two new surveys, both of which ask questions designed to capture secular beliefs. To develop these questions, we turned to philosophers who have researched the nuances of secular worldviews (Onfray 2007; Taylor 2007). We also studied the history of philosophical debates to track changing trends over time and observe how some philosophical ideas have entered into popular culture (Greenblatt 2011; Kors 1990; Minois 1998; Palmer 2014). Even though atheists and agnostics are likely to be educated (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006), they are not always familiar with the technical jargon of philosophers, nor do they discern the nuanced distinctions that fuel philosophical disputes (see, for example, Bourget and Chalmers 2014; Bourget and Chalmers 2023). To develop our survey questions, we also relied on interviews and field research we have conducted with atheists and agnostics to identify language that they are more likely to recognize and use. With the help of these two surveys and their novel questions, we show that those who identify as “atheist” or “agnostic” adhere to a coherent worldview far more consistently than their negativity belies.

Though we are not the first social scientists to show that atheists and agnostics have beliefs (Bullivant et al. 2019; Lee 2015; Silver et al. 2014), our essay makes several contributions to the increasingly sophisticated scholarship on secular people: 1) we rely on new evidence to join a growing chorus of scholars demonstrating that nonbelievers share beliefs with one another; 2) we show that everyday people who identify as “atheist” or “agnostic” believe in exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude in addition to their beliefs about the existence of God; 3) and we argue that when social scientists are interpreting surveys and other data, they should

recognize that those who identify as “atheist” or “agnostic” share fundamental tenets of a belief system. We are not asking researchers or everyday people to adopt new terms or identify with a single umbrella term. We are arguing for a clearer understanding of the terms we already use. Ultimately, it is good news for scholars of religion and nonreligion that self-identified “atheists” and “agnostics” hold distinctive beliefs because it means that decades of research have captured far more about research participants than it may have intended.

## **APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING ATHEISTS AND AGNOSTICS**

To show how our findings build on the work of other scholars, it helps to distinguish among the terms that social scientists use when describing secular or nonreligious people. The religiously unaffiliated, or the so-called “nones,” includes all of those who identify as “atheist,” “agnostic,” or “nothing in particular” (Kosmin et al. 2009; Pew Research Center 2015). Though “atheist” and “agnostic” are belief-based terms, surveys like the American Religious Identification Survey and Pew’s Religious Landscape Survey treat them as measures of religious (non-) belonging by placing them alongside options for indicating one’s “present religion, if any” (Kosmin et al. 2009; Pew Research Center 2015). “Present religion” is itself ambiguous language, but it is generally considered to measure religious affiliation, i.e., belonging or identity. It might or might not tell researchers much about beliefs. Indeed, the religiously unaffiliated are heterogeneous by various measures (Baker and Smith 2015; Chaves 2011; Lim et al. 2010; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2020). According to the 2021 General Social Survey, 28% of Americans have no religious affiliation; 6.6% of Americans do not believe in a god, 9.1% do not believe there is a way to find out if there is a god, and 50% believe in a personal god (theism); 36% either never pray or pray less than once a week; and 21% of Americans believe the bible is the word of god, 41% believe it is inspired, and 29% believe it is an ancient book of

myths (the rest report some other response). As these percentages indicate, religious beliefs and behaviors do not align perfectly with religious identities.

Atheists and agnostics are a smaller set of people than the religiously unaffiliated. According to how we tend to write and interpret survey questions, atheists and agnostics are those who do not belong to or affiliate with a religion and who do not hold religious beliefs (by which we usually mean belief in the Judeo-Christian God but can also mean any god). Those who affirm they are “atheist” or “agnostic” on surveys might identify as *both* atheist *and* agnostic in their everyday life, and they might also prefer to identify by another term for nonbelievers, such as “humanist” or “freethinker” (Langston et al. 2017). As we discuss below, atheist and agnostic are not mutually exclusive terms depending on how they are defined, since one refers to the absence of belief in a being (atheist) and the other can refer to the absence of knowledge (agnostic). As a result, someone can be both an atheist and agnostic (c.f. Bergstrom et al. 2022), which is not typically an option in most major surveys (c.f. Pew Research Center 2015).

Some nonbelievers, such as Humanistic Jews or Humanist Unitarian Universalists, identify as both atheist or agnostic *and* religious. This means that some survey respondents must choose how they would like to present themselves, such as when both “Jewish” and “atheist” are valid responses (Blankholm 2022: 78-79). Of course the same is true of those who identify as culturally Catholic and atheist, though Christian atheism is not as widely accepted as Jewish or Buddhist atheism in the United States (Blankholm 2022: 77). If we treat “atheist” and “agnostic” as a belief system, however, then it makes sense that someone who adheres to that belief system would consider their religious affiliation to be “Jewish,” “Catholic,” or “nothing in particular.” When scholars disaggregate religiosity by distinguishing among religious belief, religious

belonging, and religious behavior, the category “nonreligious” becomes messier and less helpful, but we gain a clearer understanding of people who are not religious in various senses of the term.

Political scientists David Campbell, Geoffrey Layman, and John Green have made perhaps the most convincing argument that nonbelievers adhere to a secular belief system (2021). Relying on a range of evidence from surveys they conducted, which included a number of novel questions, the authors show that nonbelievers are “guided by their understanding of the observable, natural world (such as science and philosophy), in contrast to an unobservable, supernatural realm (such as scripture and revelation)” (Campbell, Layman, and Green 2021: 26). The worldview that Campbell, Layman, and Green describe is strikingly epistemological: it is based in fundamental beliefs about how best to know the world (science, philosophy), as well as how it *cannot* be validly known (scripture, revelation). It is important for social scientists to include the ways of knowing that secular people reject when trying to identify their epistemology because as Campbell, Layman, and Green rightly note, “many religious traditions have space for beliefs that come from the natural realm, such as science and philosophy” (2021: 8). What sets the secular belief system apart is its *exclusive* reliance on empiricism (deriving knowledge from sense-experience) and reason (in this case, deducing or inferring from observable facts), especially through the practice of science. Campbell, Layman, and Green find that those who adhere to a secular belief system are distinct in numerous ways from others among the nonreligious. Not only do they share fundamental beliefs about how best to know the world, but they also largely share leftist political leanings and are comparatively more civically and politically engaged than others who are nonreligious. *Secular Surge* shows that atheists and agnostics are a belief-based subgroup of Americans who are politically and socially distinct (2021).



As historians of atheism, agnosticism, and humanism have shown, nonbelievers have debated their beliefs among themselves and with their critics for centuries (Brown 2017; Gray 2018; Kors 1990, 2016a, 2016b; Palmer 2014). Social scientists have taken greater interest in these beliefs only recently. For example, in 2013 Stephen LeDrew and Jesse M. Smith debated whether nonbelievers share beliefs in a series of essays in *Sociology of Religion* (LeDrew 2013a, 2013b; Smith 2013). LeDrew argued, against Smith, that “atheists share beliefs that they affirm, not only ones they reject” (2013b: 465). We agree with LeDrew that there are positive contents to the belief systems of nonbelievers, though our perspective benefits from significant studies published more recently (Blankholm 2022; Day 2022; Schnell, de Boer, and Alma 2023). We also agree that there is variety among secular belief systems. For example, LeDrew has argued for a distinction between “scientific” atheism and “humanistic” atheism. He acknowledges that both rely on a scientific epistemology, but he argues that they apply science to social life differently (2012, 2016). Though our aim in this essay is to show what beliefs nonbelievers share, we agree that future research on the differences in belief among them is imperative.

One recent and excellent example of a nuanced approach to nonbelievers’ beliefs is van Mulukom et al.’s analysis of the “worldviews” of nonbelievers in ten countries around the world (2023). They consider “worldviews” to be “sets of beliefs about the nature of reality and one’s existence within it,” and they argue “that worldviews are important for religious believers and nonbelievers alike” (2023: 144). They found that the most commonly held belief by nonbelievers is an emphasis on science as the most reliable or exclusive path to truth. They also found a strong emphasis on “humanism,” which they interpret as the related beliefs that 1) humans are special, 2) human history is progressive, and 3) human reason is uniquely able to overcome problems. The next-most salient beliefs they found are skepticism and naturalism, which are both closely

aligned with science as a practice and way of knowing (2023: 151). Though these beliefs are also strikingly epistemological, van Mulukom et al.'s analysis helps flesh out the beliefs that nonbelievers sometimes hold, such as centering the individual human as the primary knower or placing the pursuit of knowledge by humans into a progress narrative.

It is worth noting that whether nonbelievers share beliefs is of interest to more than just historians, philosophers, and social scientists. U.S. courts have long debated and ultimately recognized the belief systems of atheists, humanists, and other kinds of nonbelievers, and they have considered their beliefs to be worthy of protection under the religious “free exercise” clause of the First Amendment (Blankholm 2018). One early example is the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision that allowed atheist Roy Torcaso to become a notary public in the state of Maryland even though the state’s constitution forbade anyone from holding office who would not declare their belief in God. In a footnote in the majority decision in *Torcaso*, its author, Justice Hugo Black, wrote, “Among religions in this country which do not teach what would generally be considered a belief in the existence of God are Buddhism, Taoism, Ethical Culture, Secular Humanism and others” (*Torcaso v. Watkins* 1961: 496 n.u.).

More recently, in 2005, the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that atheist prison inmate James Kaufman should be allowed to form a study group for atheists. In the exact words of the decision, “Atheism is Kaufman’s religion, and the group that he wanted to start was religious in nature even though it expressly rejects a belief in a supreme being” (*Kaufman v. McCaughtry* 7th Cir. 2005: 8). These are just two of many examples in which U.S. courts consider identification as an “atheist” or with “atheism” to reflect an individual’s adherence to a belief system that is analogous to traditionally religious worldviews. Social scientists are long

overdue in figuring out what Americans really mean when they call themselves “atheist” or “agnostic.”

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Data***

To demonstrate that atheists and agnostics share beliefs with one another, we rely on evidence from two new surveys. The first is the Secular Communities Survey (SCS), which collected 12,370 valid responses from organized nonbelievers in the United States in March and April of 2021. For the purposes of the survey, “organized nonbelievers” are people who responded affirmatively in response to our screener question, “Have you ever belonged to a group or community, online or in-person, specifically for atheists, agnostics, humanists, or other kinds of nonbelievers?” (c.f. Cragun, Manning, and Fazzino 2017). Some of the groups that nonbelievers join are national organizations in which membership is free, like the American Humanist Association, and others require members to pay dues, like the Freedom From Religion Foundation. Around 1,400 nonbeliever organizations are local communities in which secular people meet with one another face-to-face (García and Blankholm 2016), though most organized nonbelievers are members of groups that meet in person rarely if ever.

We reached our sample by first compiling a database of all of the local nonbeliever communities in the United States. Whenever possible, we gathered contact information for the leaders of these groups, from which we assembled an electronic mailing list that we used to distribute the survey that was administered online. We also contacted the largest nonbeliever organizations, which have nationwide membership, and requested that they share a link to our survey with their electronic mailing lists, which some did. We then promoted the survey on

social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, appeared on podcasts listened to by nonbelievers, spoke at the meetings of local communities via Zoom, and encouraged nonbelievers to spread the survey by word of mouth. Our efforts have resulted in the largest survey of organized nonbelievers ever fielded.<sup>6</sup>

We validated responses to the SCS through a rigorous series of procedures. First, we removed all cases that did not complete the survey. Next, we removed all cases that failed our attention check question or that straight-lined their responses to all questions. Then, we removed all cases in which a respondent did not provide a valid U.S. zip code. Finally, with the help of a team of graduate student researchers, we coded every single response to the survey's several open-ended questions. By analyzing tens of thousands of open-ended responses individually, we identified a few more cases that we judged to be incoherent and thus invalid and removed them.

The second survey we rely on in this essay is the latest wave of the Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG), which has been studying a group of 358 families since 1970 (Bengtson et al. 2013). Between November 2021 and September 2022, the LSOG collected 1,410 responses from the third (G3), fourth (G4), and fifth (G5) generations of the original 358 families. This survey was administered online and via mail by a team at the University of Wisconsin Survey Center. Of the eligible members of the fourth generation, 67% were asked to provide names and contact information for their children who were aged 16 and older. They were also asked for consent to let LSOG contact children who were under 18 years of age. Participants included 1,178 ongoing members, which is 67% of the eligible sample. This means 650 of the G3s (74%)

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<sup>6</sup> American Atheists fielded a survey with a larger number of responses (N = 33,897), but respondents were not exclusively organized nonbelievers (Frazer and El-Shafei 2020).

and 528 of the G4s (60%) are included in the study. G4s provided sufficient contact information and consent for the researchers to contact 372 G5 children. Of those, 232 G5s participated, which is 63% of the eligible sample; this included 177 G5 adults (59%) and 55 G5 minors (81%).

Because the SCS gathered responses from a target population that self-identifies as secular, it included questions designed to capture the nuances of beliefs *among* nonbelievers. We present here the results from two of those questions to illustrate that the participants in the SCS are, indeed, nonbelievers. We included a question about belief in god (in contrast to religious identity, which is the primary focus of our article), which we copied from the General Social Survey and that has mutually exclusive response options: “Which statement below comes closest to expressing what you believe about God?” SCS participants were largely nonbelievers, with 96% of SCS respondents not believing in God (i.e., atheist; 82%) or not knowing if they believe or not knowing whether there was any way to find out (i.e., agnostic; 14%). Of the remaining 4%, almost all of them reported believing in a higher power (3%) while less than 1% chose one of the belief options (i.e., “I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others,” “While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God,” or “I know that God really exists, and I have no doubts about it”). We also asked participants, “Which of the following describes your current relationship with religion,” to ensure that the participants in the SCS were secular. The response options were not mutually exclusive and included, “anti-religious,” “indifferent to religion,” “not religious,” “spiritual,” and “religious.” The response selected more than any other was “anti-religious,” selected by 60% of respondents, followed by “not religious,” which was selected by 46.6% of respondents; and 14.7% selected “indifferent to religion.” Just 1% of respondents identified as “religious” and 8.4% identified as “spiritual.”

[Insert Table 1 here.]

The SCS provides a good starting point for understanding who nonbelievers are and what they believe, which is how we use it in this article. Because the LSOG gathers responses from a religiously diverse target population, its questions are designed to capture a range of religion-related beliefs, so they are less able to capture the nuances of secular beliefs in particular. The LSOG is a better survey for testing what is distinctive about atheists and agnostics than for discerning subtle differences among them.

## ***Methods***

Since the LSOG is a longitudinal study, adding new questions without increasing the survey's length requires removing questions that have been asked in previous waves. In some cases, these questions have been asked across several waves for several decades. Though the research team that fielded the LSOG designed it to answer a wide range of research questions, only some of which are related to religion, the LSOG includes three questions about epistemology and attitudes toward death. Like the SCS, the LSOG gives respondents the option to identify as "atheist" or "agnostic" in response to a question about their "present religion, if any." By analyzing both surveys together, we can identify the beliefs that atheists and agnostics hold and that other kinds of nonreligious people do not.

As we noted above, we agree with Campbell, Layman, and Green (2021) that "atheist" and "agnostic" are belief-based identities claimed by people who trust scientific empiricism as the best way of knowing the world and do not trust sources of knowledge like divinely inspired scripture or revelation. As we also noted, we call this distinctive epistemological combination "*exclusive* empiricism" to distinguish it from an epistemology in which *both* science *and* scripture or revelation are trustworthy. For example, creationist Christians support their claims with empirical evidence, though they do not make that evidence the sole basis of their beliefs

like exclusive empiricists do (Bielo 2018: 90; Toumey 1994: 64). They are empiricists in some ways, though not exclusively.

To measure exclusive empiricism in the LSOG, we rely on a combination of two questions. The first asks whether they agree with the statement, “Science is the best way of knowing the world.” The second asks whether they agree with the statement, “Scripture is divinely inspired.” Response options for both items included, “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “Disagree,” and “Strongly Disagree.” Though the LSOG is not a representative sample of Americans, we use these percentages both to see how common these views are among the nonreligious and as part of a measure to predict identification as atheist or agnostic.

We recoded these two variables by collapsing the two categories of agreement ("Strongly Agree" and "Agree") and disagreement ("Disagree" and "Strongly Disagree") into dummy variables with two categories ("Agree" and "Disagree"). Based on the two dichotomous variables, we generated a new dummy variable that classifies as "Exclusive empiricist" those individuals who agreed that "Science is the best way of knowing the world" and, at the same time, disagreed that "Scripture is divinely inspired." All other possible combinations of responses were categorized as "Not exclusive empiricist."

To inquire further about whether exclusive empiricism is part of a coherent system of beliefs, we can consider what other beliefs fit logically with exclusive empiricism and ask whether atheists and agnostics share those, as well. Our ethnographic research and that of others (Engelke 2015b; Manning 2018) suggests that atheists and agnostics have a distinctive attitude toward death, which we call “mortal finitude,” though others have called this perspective on death “annihilation” or “secular death” (Haimila and Muraja 2021). We included a question on the SCS that asked specifically about death: “Which of the following statements best describes

your views about what happens after death?” Response options included, “The soul survives and goes to heaven, hell, or purgatory,” “The soul survives and is reincarnated,” “Individual consciousness ends and becomes part of universal consciousness,” “Death is the final end,” and “other.” We consider those who selected the option “Death is the final end” to adhere to mortal finitude.

We included on the SCS an open-ended question that allowed nonbelievers to elaborate on their beliefs, which many described with great precision. To help illustrate that beliefs in exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude are often incorporated into the worldviews of secular individuals, we present some of the responses to the following open-ended question: “In your own words, how would you describe your religious beliefs, your spirituality, or your lack of both?” Though the SCS is anonymous, we assigned pseudonyms to respondents whom we quote.

Our hypothesis, then, is that those who select “atheist” or “agnostic” when asked about their “present religion” are usually telling researchers that they are exclusive empiricists who believe in mortal finitude. For the reasons we outline above, we consider exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude to be aspects of a coherent secular belief system that is incidentally atheist or agnostic about the existence of God. We test this hypothesis by running a binomial logistic regression model that estimates the odds of being an atheist/agnostic or not as a nonlinear function. In our model, we consider as predictors being an exclusive empiricist, agreeing with mortal finitude, not believing in God, and a set of sociodemographic control variables (gender, education, age, and racial background).

## RESULTS

We start by noting the results of the two questions that we used to capture exclusive empiricism in the LSOG. [Table 2](#) shows that 98% of SCS respondents agree that “science is the



best way of knowing the world.” Inversely, 98% of SCS respondents disagreed that “Scripture is divinely inspired.” Responses in the LSOG were far more diverse, with 70% of respondents agreeing that science is the best way of knowing the world and 49% disagreeing that scripture is divinely inspired. In the LSOG, it is possible to combine those who agree that science is the best way of knowing the world and those who disagree that scripture is divinely inspired. This provides us a measure of exclusive empiricism. In the LSOG, 42% of respondents are exclusive empiricists.

[Insert Table 2 here.]

The results on the mortal finitude question were similar in the SCS and LSOG. [Table 3](#) shows that 83% of participants in the SCS chose “death is the final end,” with another 8.4% choosing “individual consciousness ends and becomes part of universal consciousness.” Less than 2% chose an option that included the continued existence of the soul. In the LSOG, far fewer individuals chose “death is the final end,” just 21.7%. The modal response was that the soul survives and is judged, with 38.5% of respondents selecting that option. These results illustrate that the SCS sample is largely made up of nonbelievers who are exclusive empiricists who also believe in mortal finitude, while the LSOG is a much more diverse sample.

[Insert Table 3 here.]

To illustrate that nonbelievers include exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude in their understanding of their worldview, we present several quotes from the SCS that are generally representative of the open-ended responses included in the survey. A sixty-five-year-old man named William, who lives in rural Pennsylvania and identified as an atheist, wrote, “I am a physicist and an empiricist. If it cannot be tested and measured, it does not exist.” A fifty-year-old woman named Caroline, who is from San Francisco and identified as an atheist, explained

her beliefs in a similar way: “There is no apparent empirical evidence for the existence of deities, souls, chi [qi], etc. so I feel that they are so unlikely as to exist that it's perfectly reasonable to behave as if they don't.” Roger, a thirty-year-old man from Columbia, South Carolina, who also identified as an atheist, wrote, “I believe in empirical science, skepticism, and parsimony. I have little interest in non-scientific claims about reality or the world (other than some philosophy here and there).” These descriptions of exclusive empiricism are consistent with the findings of qualitative researchers who have studied the epistemologies of nonbelievers (Blankholm 2022; LeDrew 2016).

A number of SCS respondents connected exclusive empiricism, nonbelief in God, and mortal finitude as aspects of a single belief system. For example, an 81-year-old man named Gerald, who lives in a coastal suburb in Florida, emphasized sense-experience, and especially observation, when explaining why he does not believe in God or an afterlife: “As a man of science, I understand how things function, and only evolution could produce such a complex and wonderful world. What we see is what there is: no ghosts, no God, no spirits, no angels or demons. No boring everlasting existence.” A 53-year-old woman named Joanne, who lives in a suburb of Austin, Texas, also emphasized empirical evidence and mortal finitude when describing her beliefs: “I can't see any evidence that we are anything more than material beings whose atoms will redistribute upon death.” An eighty-two-year-old man named Charles, who lives in a small city in Arizona, identified as atheist and selected “Death is the final end,” in response to that same open-ended question about his beliefs, made a direct connection between death and life’s meaning: “Death is a happy occasion – peace; giving back to earth what earth has given to me.” The data in the SCS illustrate that the vast majority of organized nonbelievers in the US, like Gerald, Joanne, and Charles, are exclusive empiricists who believe that death is

the final end of a person's existence. These beliefs hang together as part of a single system that includes more than mere nonbelief in God.

[Insert Table 4 here.]

To illustrate the explanatory power of exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude, we turn now to a logistic regression model in which identifying as either atheist or agnostic when asked about religious identity in the LSOG was regressed upon basic demographic variables, exclusive empiricism, mortal finitude, and belief in a god (see Table 4). Among the demographic variables, only age was statistically significantly related to identifying as an atheist or agnostic ( $OR=.97$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ); each additional year of age reduces the odds of identifying one's religious affiliation as agnostic or atheist by 3%. Exclusive empiricism is the strongest independent variable, increasing the odds of identifying one's religious affiliation as agnostic or atheist 7.38 times ( $p < 0.001$ ). Mortal finitude is also a statistically significant predictor of identifying one's religious affiliation as atheist or agnostic in the LSOG, increasing the odds of identifying as such 2.42 times over those who do not believe death is the final end ( $p < .001$ ).

It is worth noting that exclusive empiricism is actually a stronger predictor of identifying one's religious affiliation as atheist or agnostic than is not believing in a god ( $OR = 4.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ). That exclusive empiricism is a stronger predictor of self-identification as atheist or agnostic than belief in a god shows researchers what people really mean when they report their religious affiliation as an atheist or agnostic. Finally, we note that the pseudo  $R^2$  of our model is 0.309. This suggests that the variables included provide an excellent fit and that we can account for a sizable proportion of the variation in self-identification as atheist or agnostic using these three independent variables.

## DISCUSSION

Drawing on two datasets, one made up almost entirely of nonbelievers (the Secular Communities Survey; SCS) and one that is more religiously heterogeneous (Longitudinal Survey of Generations; LSOG), we examined the extent to which exclusive empiricism (the belief that science is the best way to understand the world and scripture and divine revelation are not to be trusted) and mortal finitude (the belief that death is the final end) are beliefs held by nonbelievers. The SCS illustrated that the vast majority of organized nonbelievers in our sample are exclusive empiricists who also agree with mortal finitude. We then used measures of these two beliefs to predict self-identification as atheist or agnostic in the LSOG and found that they are, indeed, strong predictors of atheist/agnostic self-identification in a more heterogeneous population. As a result, we believe we may have come to a better understanding of what those who identify as atheist or agnostic are actually telling survey researchers when asked about their “present religion”: they are exclusive empiricists who believe in mortal finitude.

There are some nuances of the secular belief system that are important to understand when interpreting our analysis of the SCS and the LSOG. Whether an exclusive empiricist identifies as an atheist or an agnostic can depend on personality or disposition and have little or nothing to do with their epistemological or ontological beliefs (Karim and Saroglou 2022). Especially because atheism bears such a strong stigma, identifying as agnostic can also be a way to avoid stigma and promote social cohesion (Blankholm 2022; Edgell, Frost, and Stewart 2017). The SCS and LSOG help demonstrate that atheists and agnostics can share the same beliefs by allowing respondents to check multiple responses when selecting their “present religion, if any.” Given the option, many people identify as both atheist *and* agnostic in the SCS, though fewer do so in the LSOG (in part because it is a much smaller and more religiously diverse sample). Table

1 shows that 86% of SCS respondents selected either atheist or agnostic as their “present religion, if any.” Of those 86%, 12.4% selected *both* atheist *and* agnostic, which is 10.7% of the total sample of 12,370. Table 1 shows that 15.9% of LSOG respondents selected either atheist or agnostic as their “present religion, if any.” Of those, 6.7% identified as *both* atheist *and* agnostic, which is 1% of the total sample of 1,410.

If we understand agnosticism as “uncertainty” about the existence of a god, then identifying as both atheist and agnostic might seem contradictory. But if we understand agnosticism as “empirical humility,” then agnosticism and atheism are compatible (see Bergstrom et al. 2022). Drawing a clear distinction between epistemology and ontology is helpful here. Epistemology concerns knowledge and valid ways of knowing the world. Ontology concerns reality, or what exists. Atheism is an ontological statement about reality, and in particular, the reality of a god; agnosticism is an epistemological statement about the knowability of the reality of gods. Even setting aside social reasons for identifying as one or the other, atheist and agnostic are different kinds of worldview statements that can co-exist in a single belief system. This is because a strict exclusive empiricist can believe that the existence of a god is not a testable hypothesis and is therefore not knowable while also finding it so unlikely that a god exists that they live as if gods are not real, that is, as an atheist (see Smith 1979).

Though ethnographers have also observed that some people identify as both atheist and agnostic (see Blankholm 2022: 51-53), surveys typically ask respondents to choose between the two identities when asking about “present religion, if any,” or they present the response options as mutually exclusive when asking participants their views toward the existence of a god or higher power. For instance, the General Social Survey’s question “GOD,” which has been included in the survey since 1988, includes two responses that correspond to atheist and agnostic,

respectively: “I don't believe in God” and “I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out.” For an exclusive empiricist, responding could force a difficult decision because they can answer honestly that they both do not believe in God *and* do not believe there is any way to find out. Though these atheist agnostics cannot be absolutely certain that there is not a God, they can be as good as certain. We have combined “atheist” and “agnostic” in our LSOG model because we find that both identities are plausible ways of signaling different aspects (ontology or epistemology) of the same underlying belief system. The efficacy of our model supports our approach.

The empirical humility of exclusive empiricists extends to attitudes toward death since what happens after death is also empirically unknowable. For this reason, we find it unsurprising that respondents are less certain about death, an ontological question, than they are about exclusive empiricism, an epistemological question. In the SCS, 98% agree that “Science is the best way of knowing the world,” and 98% disagree that “Scripture is divinely inspired,” but only 83% of respondents selected “Death is the final end.” Lower adherence to mortal finitude reflects disagreements among exclusive empiricists over materialism and the nature of reality. What matter is and what it means to be materialist have been debated for centuries (Eagleton 2016). Professional philosophers have largely turned to “physicalism” to escape the excess of materialism's meanings, though the term is not widely known by the general public (Melnik 2003). A lack of consensus in the SCS on questions of death could reflect these debates, which remain thorny because the empirical humility of exclusive empiricism makes it difficult to know the nature of reality for certain. We are not surprised that there is more agreement about epistemology than ontology among exclusive empiricists.

We have described the complexities of secular beliefs because we want to emphasize the extraordinary agreement among nonbelievers despite the many ways they express their differences. Given the commonalities in their beliefs, atheists and agnostics can reasonably assert that they are both atheist and agnostic if they so choose. They can state they do not believe in a god and that they do not believe it is possible to know for certain whether a god exists. They can believe that individual consciousness ends at death, and they can want to qualify that statement by describing how their atoms or the energy of their consciousness disperse and become part of the universe, which may or may not be made of matter. They can even tell researchers that they find the questions they are asking to be irrelevant or too difficult to answer, which some SCS respondents did when asked if they had any final thoughts they would like to share.

Despite all of these subtle differences and the challenges that nonbelievers face when trying to answer survey questions honestly, our model demonstrates with a high degree of confidence that individuals who report their “present religion, if any” as atheist or agnostic share the fundamentals of a coherent belief system. That they find “atheist” or “agnostic” to be the best response does not mean that they define themselves based on their absence of belief in God. On the contrary, our results show that they can select those terms to express that they adhere to a belief system that includes exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude. We consider these findings to be remarkable if only because they have been hiding in plain sight.

We should also observe the limitations of our findings. The SCS gathers responses from many different kinds of nonbelievers in the United States, and the LSOG’s sample is rich in its religious diversity, but neither survey is nationally representative. Our findings would surely be strengthened if future research were able to replicate them in a nationally representative sample. Another limitation is the simplicity and lack of nuance in our measures for exclusive empiricism

and mortal finitude. For example, Tatjana Schnell has developed scalar measures for secular beliefs like scientism, personal responsibility, and humanism (2015). Though our simplicity helps us identify the fundamental tenets that are uniquely shared by atheists and agnostics, it does not enable us to observe subtle differences between the two identities as scholars like Schnell have (Schnell et al. 2023). Psychologists have also developed the Post-Critical Belief Scale, which helps researchers inquire whether those who say they believe in “God” have a symbolic or metaphorical understanding of the god-concept rather than a literal one (Hutsebaut 1996; Wulff 1991). Accounting for these differences might help explain why atheists and agnostics are more likely to be exclusive empiricists than they are to not believe in God. Whether those conducting a survey are using language in the same way as those taking it is a difficult question to answer, as anthropologists who study semiotic ideologies have shown (Crapanzano 2000; Keane 2007).

## **CONCLUSION**

If we accept and take seriously the fact that those who identify as atheist or agnostic are likely to share the fundamental tenets of a secular belief system, then there are a number of implications and areas in need of further research. The most straightforward implication is that nonbelievers like atheists and agnostics only lack “beliefs” if the notion is limited to a god or the supernatural. Scholars who have been developing the concept of worldview have observed rightly that nonbelievers have recognizable beliefs (Taves 2020; van Mulukom et al. 2023), and a growing number of scholars are attending to the distinctive ethical attitudes, practices, and even moods and feelings of nonbelievers (Blankholm 2022; Engelke 2015a; Pellegrini 2009; Scheer, Fadil, and Johansen 2019). We hope that demonstrating a direct connection between claiming an



atheist or agnostic identity and sharing a secular belief system will help organize the disparate work that has treated these identities as merely negative or has approached them piecemeal (Bullivant and Ruse 2015).

Thankfully, studies are already underway that are sensitive to the differences among nonbelievers and mapping their internal variety (Bullivant, Lanman, Farias, and Lee 2019). We hope that these attempts will not lose sight of the forest for the trees and will continue to attend to what is unique about atheists and agnostics when compared to those who participate in religious traditions. Of course, there is also more research needed on the ways in which atheism and agnosticism are not exclusive to the nonreligious. Traditions like Judaism and Christianity have developed secular thinking from within (Altizer 1966; Stern 2018; Taylor 1984), and historians of science would rightly ask whether exclusive empiricism is opposed to religion in the first place (Harrison 2015).

That atheists and agnostics can also be Jewish or Christian raises questions about existing survey taxonomies that force respondents to choose between those identities. It also raises questions about methodological approaches that do not disaggregate religion into belief, behavior, and belonging. How are atheists and agnostics who participate in religious traditions or who organize themselves into groups for nonbelievers different from atheists and agnostics who are not organized as such? And perhaps more importantly in light of this essay's findings, how are they *not* so different from one another? What do they share? Recognizing nuance, diversity, and difference is intrinsically important in social scientific research. Recognizing what is shared across differences can also be vital when a shared identity that is potentially empowering is being fractured and denied.

The landscape of American religion is changing rapidly, and glimpsing it demands that we disaggregate “religion” into belief, belonging/identity, and behavior (or perhaps even subtler categories). It also demands that we attend to the contradictions inherent to using categories that unify incoherently heterogeneous groups, such as the “nonreligious” and the “nones,” which seem to confuse everyone not trained in the sociology of religion. Disaggregating “religion” in this way can be an anxious endeavor for scholars who have relied on its meaning being fixed. We hope our approach can allay these fears by showing that some of the categories that social scientists have relied on the most are not so much broken as misunderstood. By finding the positive in atheist and agnostic, we have turned these labels on their head. They now make much more sense as responses to a question about “present religion, if any.” We hope our approach can be restorative rather than destructive by allowing us to read a great deal of research in a new light.

By extension, our findings imply the need for a more precise understanding of secularization (Bruce 2013; Kasselstrand et al. 2023). There is, first and foremost, the persistent question of what, exactly, we mean by “secular” in secularization (Casanova 1994). If the beliefs of nonbelievers are simply those that are held by people who have removed religious ways of thinking from their lives, then secularization can be a story of religious subtraction (Taylor 2007). Disaggregating religion into belief, behavior, and belonging complicates this picture because different aspects of religion can decline at different rates for different reasons (Kasselstrand et al. 2023). But what if secularization named the growth of a particular belief system that includes exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude? In other words, what if secularization named growth in adherence to secular belief systems? If this were the case we would have to distinguish between growth in exclusive empiricism and growth in other belief

systems that are usually considered nonreligious, such as metaphysical spirituality (Albanese 2007; Bender 2010). We would then also have to distinguish between secularization and dereligionization or dechristianization. These are difficult questions, but we hope our findings can strengthen the ground beneath those who try to answer them.

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Table 1

*What is your present religion or religions, if any? (SCS and LSOG)*

	SCS (%) (n = 12,350)		LSOG (%) (n = 1,410)	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Atheist	78.81	21.19	7.87	92.13
Agnostic	18.11	81.89	9.08	90.92
Not religious	23.6	76.4	21.13	78.87
Nothing in particular	3.68	96.32	13.33	86.67
Unitarian Universalist	4.36	95.64	0.99	99.01
Buddhist	1.60	98.40	1.63	98.37
Jewish	3.22	96.78	7.45	92.55
Ethical Culture	2.06	97.94	NA	NA
Hindu	0.08	99.92	0.28	99.72
Catholic	0.31	99.69	9.15	90.85
Protestant Christian	0.20	99.80	14.54	85.46
Nondenominational Christian or just “Christian”	0.12	99.88	18.87	81.13
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, LDS or Mormon	0.08	99.92	7.59	92.41
Muslim	0.04	99.96	0	100
Orthodox (Greek, Russian, or some other Orthodox Church)	.03	99.97	0.14	99.86
Jehovah's Witness	.01	99.99	0.85	99.15

Something else	10.1	89.7	6.6	93.4
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Note. The response categories are not mutually exclusive. Therefore, the table shows the relative frequencies by row, using "Yes" to indicate how many respondents selected each of the religions listed. "Ethical Culture" is not part of the list of religions considered by the LSOG.

Table 2

*Currently, do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? (SCS and LSOG)*

	SCS (%)		LSOG (%)		Total (%)	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	SCS	LSOG
Science is the best way of knowing the world.	97.87	2.13	70.14	29.86	100 (n=6,375)	100 (n=1,393)
Scripture is divinely inspired.	1.31	98.69	51.31	48.69	100 (n=5,963)	100 (n=1,374)

Table 3

*Which of the following statements best describes your views about what happens after death?  
(SCS and LSOG)*

	SCS (%) (n=12,340)	LSOG (%) (n=1,398)
The soul survives and goes to heaven, hell, or purgatory	0.15	38.48
The soul survives and is reincarnated	1.63	9.16
Individual consciousness ends and becomes part of universal consciousness	8.45	16.67
Death is the final end	83.24	21.67
Other	6.53	14.02
Total	100	100

Table 4  
*Logistic regression model*

Atheist or agnostic	Coefficient	Std. Error	z	P >  z	OR	[95% conf. interval]	
Exclusive empiricist (1=Yes)	1.999	0.236	8.45	0.000	7.383	4.644	11.736
Death is the final end (1=Agree)	0.885	0.199	4.45	0.000	2.423	1.640	3.579
I don't believe in God (1=Agree)	1.406	0.216	6.50	0.000	4.079	2.669	6.232
Female (not nonbinary)	-0.146	0.185	-0.79	0.431	0.864	0.601	1.242
Nonbinary	0.390	0.556	0.70	0.483	1.477	0.497	4.390
High School Diploma or GED	0.098	0.443	0.22	0.824	1.103	0.463	2.626
Associate's degree	0.026	0.481	0.05	0.957	1.026	0.400	2.633
Bachelor's degree	0.469	0.456	1.03	0.303	1.599	0.654	3.906
Master's degree	0.668	0.481	1.39	0.165	1.951	0.760	5.010
Doctoral degree	0.443	0.546	0.81	0.417	1.558	0.534	4.543
Age	-0.027	0.006	-4.72	0.000	0.974	0.963	0.985
Racial background (only white)	0.064	0.346	0.19	0.852	1.067	0.542	2.100
(cons)	-2.465	0.548	-4.50	0.000	0.0850	0.029	0.249
Pseudo $R^2$ : 0.3090							