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The Beliefs of Nonbelievers: Exclusive Empiricism and Mortal Finitude Among Atheists and Agnostics*

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ABSTRACT

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 a new survey of very secular Americans and the General Social Survey, we demonstrate a statistically significant and substantively meaningful relationship, in both predictive directions, between identifying as atheist or agnostic and holding certain beliefs about how best to know the world and what happens when we die. We can reliably predict that most people in the U.S. who trust science, reason, and evidence and do not trust religious sources will identify as atheist or agnostic—and vice-versa. We find the same bi-directional relationship with belief in mortal finitude, i.e., that death is the final end. Our findings suggest that exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude are positive tenets of belief systems that those who identify as atheist or agnostic are likely to hold.

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 negative 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? In recent years, a range of scholars have shown that many nonbelievers have a belief system or a worldview (LeDrew 2016; van Mulukom et al. 2023; see also Taves 2020, but also Weir 2018). Though it is clear from this emerging literature that nonbelievers hold a range of beliefs and thus adhere to a variety of belief systems, our aim in this essay is to identify specific beliefs that those who identify as "atheist" or "agnostic" are likely to hold. In other words, given

that there is a range of “secular” belief systems, we want to consider what qualities warrant calling them “secular” and whether these qualities are always and only negative.

To demonstrate that atheists and agnostics in the U.S. share more than just an absence of belief in God, we rely on two surveys: the General Social Survey (GSS) and the Secular Communities Survey (SCS). The GSS is the gold standard for researchers trying to understand American life at scale, so we rely on it to test whether the trends we observe in the SCS are also present in the larger U.S. population. The Secular Communities Survey is a new survey that asked questions designed to capture the consistency and variation in the beliefs of nonbelievers. It provides us a starting point for our inquiry, though it is not where we test our hypothesis. To develop questions for the SCS, 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 (Kors 1990; Minois 1998; Palmer 2014; Greenblatt 2011). 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 always discern the nuanced distinctions that fuel philosophical disputes (see, for example, Bourget and Chalmers 2014; Bourget and Chalmers 2023). For these reasons, we also turned to interviews and field research that we have conducted with atheists and agnostics to write questions with language that they are more likely to recognize and use.

Relying on the SCS and the GSS, we show that those in the U.S. who are exclusive empiricists and those who believe in mortal finitude are likely to identify as “atheist” or “agnostic.” We also show that atheists and agnostics in the U.S. are likely to be exclusive empiricists and likely to believe in mortal finitude.

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). Nonetheless, 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 are likely to share certain beliefs with one another; 2) we show that everyday Americans who identify as “atheist” or “agnostic” are likely to believe in exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude in addition to their beliefs about the existence of God; 3) we argue that when social scientists are interpreting surveys and other data, they should recognize that those who identify as “atheist” or “agnostic” are likely to share these specific beliefs; and 4) we suggest that identifying as “atheist” or “agnostic” provides survey respondents a way to indicate that they hold a belief system that includes exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude in addition to excluding belief in God.

The irony of “nonbelievers” having beliefs is not lost on us. We retain the use of “nonbelievers” throughout this essay to emphasize this irony while refusing a break from the existing literature and prevailing cultural trends. We are not asking researchers or everyday people to adopt new terms, nor do we want to elide valuable distinctions under 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” are likely to hold distinctive beliefs beyond the mere negative because it means that decades of research has captured far more than researchers may have intended. It is also good news that there are certain beliefs that most nonbelievers are likely to hold because it affirms that “atheist” and “agnostic” are not hodge-podge surplus categories like the “religiously unaffiliated.” Atheists and agnostics are a distinct social group that surveys on religion have been right to include and that scholars have been bounding and studying with good reason.

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 is an ontological claim that refers to the absence of belief in a being (atheist) and the other is an epistemological claim that 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 and/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). However, if we treat “atheist” and “agnostic” as likely to indicate affirmative beliefs that are compatible with religious belonging, then it makes sense that someone who holds those specific beliefs might 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, religious tradition). 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 secular belief systems apart is their *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 secular belief systems 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 are also likely to share leftist political leanings and be 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 and have shown that there is a variety among secular belief systems (LeDrew 2013a, 2013b; Smith 2013; Blankholm 2022; Day 2022; Schnell, de Boer, and Alma

2023). We agree that future research on the differences in beliefs among nonbelievers is imperative, though our aim in this essay is to show which beliefs nonbelievers are very likely to share—as well as show that those who hold those beliefs are likely to identify as “atheist” or “agnostic.” We hope that doing so can help advance the efforts of researchers who have focused on differences among secular belief systems by demonstrating what is common to these systems and thus what makes them distinctively “secular.”

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 find that the most commonly held belief by nonbelievers is an emphasis on science as the most reliable or exclusive path to truth. This finding aligns with Campbell, Layman, and Green’s demonstration that empiricist epistemology is common to U.S. nonbelievers. They also find 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 find are skepticism and naturalism, which are both closely aligned with science as a practice and way of knowing (2023: 151; see Catto et al. 2023). Van Mulukom et al.’s analysis helps flesh out the variety of beliefs that nonbelievers might hold, such as centering the individual human as the primary knower or placing the pursuit of knowledge by humans into a progress narrative. Our aim of showing the specific beliefs that nonbelievers in the U.S. are likely to hold is related and also important.

METHODS

Data

To demonstrate that atheists and agnostics are likely to share beliefs with one another, we rely on evidence from two 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. It is also important to note that the broad wording of the SCS screener question led to a small percentage of respondents being god-believing because they either join such groups without adhering to their organizing beliefs, or their beliefs have changed, and they no longer belong to these groups. Their inclusion in the survey reflects variation even among those who are or have been secular joiners.

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.^{††}

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.

Because the SCS gathered responses from a target population that self-identifies as secular, we 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

^{††} 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).

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 vast majority of 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. Analyzing its results, including its open-ended questions, helped us see commonalities among nonbelievers that we had previously overlooked. That said, the SCS is an idiosyncratic sample, as we outlined above. Not only is it not random, but it is also a self-selecting subset of nonbelievers in the United States who are interested enough in nonbelief to join a mailing list or a Facebook group, and in some cases, meet up with other nonbelievers face-to-face. We assume that these secular joiners are not representative of all nonbelievers in the U.S. For this reason, the second survey we rely on is the General Social Survey (Davern et al. 2022). The GSS gives us a way to test the hypotheses that we developed with help from the SCS: 1) that those in the U.S. who are exclusive empiricists or believe in mortal finitude are likely to identify as “atheist” or “agnostic;” and 2) that those who

identify as “atheist” or “agnostic” are likely to believe in exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude in addition to not believing or being uncertain whether they believe in God. The GSS provides the best way to test whether what we have found to be distinctive among secular joiners is also distinctive among everyday atheists and agnostics in the U.S.

Methodology

Our analysis of the SCS indicated that organized nonbelievers are extremely likely to share distinct epistemological beliefs. The beliefs we found are consistent with the epistemological beliefs that Campbell, Layman, and Green found among those who are “active” secularists (2021), and they are also consistent with the findings of ethnographic research, which shows that nonbelievers are empiricists who rely on reason to order empirical facts (Quack 2011; LeDrew 2016; Blankholm 2022). 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 science and reason 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* empiricism *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 GSS, we relied on four items that measure epistemology: 1) "The great works of philosophy and science are the best source of truth, wisdom, and ethics;" 2) "When I make important decisions in my life, I rely mostly on reason and evidence;" 3) "The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for

word;” and 4) "The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything should be taken literally, word for word." Response options for these items included, “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “Disagree,” and “Strongly Disagree.” We recoded these four 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"). To test whether respondents have a distinctly secular epistemology, we constructed a single variable capturing all of those who agree or strongly agree with questions 1 and 2 and disagree or strongly disagree with questions 3 and 4. We call this variable “exclusive empiricism” to describe how respondents 1) rely on evidence gathered through empirical methods like the scientific method, 2) order that evidence and deduce from it with the aid of reason, 3) and do not rely on divine inspiration, revelation, or religious scripture as sources of knowledge (see also Campbell, Layman, and Green 2021).

Our analysis of the SCS indicated that nonbelievers are also likely to share a distinctive attitude toward death. Our ethnographic research and that of others (Engelke 2015b; Manning 2018) suggests this, as well. We call this attitude “mortal finitude,” though others have called it “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. To measure mortal finitude in the GSS, we rely on the “POSTLIFE” question: “Do you believe there

is a life after death?” We consider those who responded in the negative to believe in mortal finitude.

Our hypotheses, then, are 1) that those who are exclusive empiricists or believe in mortal finitude are likely to identify as “atheist” or “agnostic;” and 2) that those who identify as “atheist” or “agnostic” are likely to believe in exclusive empiricism or mortal finitude. For the reasons we outline above, we consider exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude to be consistent with the variety of secular belief systems that researchers have already identified (van Mulukom 2023). We tested these hypotheses by running two sets of models: 1) a group of binomial logistic regression models that estimate the odds of identifying as an “atheist,” “agnostic,” “atheist *or* agnostic,” and “nothing in particular” as a nonlinear function; and 2) another group of binomial logistic regression models that estimate the odds of those claiming the aforementioned identities being an exclusive empiricist or believing in mortal finitude as a nonlinear function. In our first group of models, we considered the following as predictors: being an exclusive empiricist, agreeing with mortal finitude, not believing in God, being unsure about believing in God, and a set of sociodemographic control variables (gender, education, age, and racial background). In our second group of models, we considered the following as predictors: identifying as an atheist, identifying as an agnostic, identifying as an atheist *or* an agnostic, and identifying as nothing in particular. We included the same set of sociodemographic control variables in the second model that we included in the first.

RESULTS

We start by noting the results of the variables that we used to capture exclusive empiricism in the SCS. 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 GSS were far more diverse, with 65% of respondents agreeing that "The great works of philosophy and science are the best source of truth, wisdom, and ethics" and 34% disagreeing that scripture is either the actual word or inspired word of God. In the GSS, as we note above, it is possible to combine four epistemological variables to create a measure of *exclusive* empiricism. In the GSS, 35% of respondents are exclusive empiricists.

The results on the mortal finitude questions in the SCS and GSS are similar to those of exclusive empiricism. 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 GSS, far fewer individuals agreed that there is no life after death: just 25%. 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 GSS is a much more diverse sample.

[Insert Table 2 here.]

To illustrate the explanatory power of exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude, we turn now to a group of four logistic regression models in which identifying as atheist, agnostic, atheist or agnostic, or nothing in particular in the GSS were regressed upon basic demographic variables, exclusive empiricism, mortal finitude, and belief in a god (see Table 2). Among the demographic variables, only age was statistically significantly related to identifying as an atheist or agnostic (OR=.977; $p < 0.001$); each additional year of age reduces the odds of identifying one's religious affiliation as agnostic or atheist by 2.3%.

Compared with those who are not exclusive empiricists, being an exclusive empiricist multiplies the odds of being an atheist or agnostic by 4.43 ($p < 0.01$). The effect is even more pronounced when predicting self-identification as agnostic, with the odds ratio escalating to

5.376 ($p < 0.01$). Compared with those who think that there is life after death, believing in mortal finitude multiplies the odds of being atheist or agnostic by 2.25 ($p < 0.05$). This effect is stronger when predicting self-identification as an atheist, with an odds ratio of 4.868 ($p < 0.01$).^{##}

Compared with those who believe in God or a higher power, rejecting its existence multiplies the odds of being an atheist or agnostic by 11.22 ($p < 0.1$). This effect is considerably stronger in the case of the model that seeks to predict self-identification as atheist, where the odds ratio grows to 41.7 ($p < 0.01$). Compared with those who express clear certainty or denial regarding the existence of God, expressing uncertainty on this issue multiplies the odds of being an atheist or agnostic by 7.08 ($p < 0.1$).

Finally, except for the model aimed at predicting "Nothing in particular," the variables incorporated into our models exhibit exceptional fit. They are proficient at explaining a substantial portion of the variability in self-identification as atheist or agnostic: 41.9% when predicting both self-identifications, 49.8% when solely predicting self-identification as an atheist, and 24.6% when agnosticism is the dependent variable.

[Insert Table 3 here.]

Additionally, we fit a pair of models where, inversely to those previously presented, we predict exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude based on secular self-identification labels (see Table 3). The sociodemographic and self-identification variables incorporated into our models

^{##} On its own, in a restricted model, mortal finitude proved to be a statistically significant predictor of agnosticism ($p < 0.01$), able to account for 7.8% of the variance in that dependent variable. However, this predictive capacity was absorbed by exclusive empiricism and by the two variables on belief in God in our extended model.

offer a good fit and explain a reasonable portion of the variability in the exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude variables: 27.6% and 20.09%, respectively.

In comparison with non-atheists, being atheist multiplies the odds of aligning with exclusive empiricism by 33.26 ($p < 0.01$) and believing in mortal finitude, by 11.28 ($p < 0.01$). Compared with non-agnostics, embracing agnosticism multiplies the odds of adhering to exclusive empiricism by 20.92 ($p < 0.01$) and of believing in mortal finitude by 55.91 ($p < 0.01$). Declaring oneself as "nothing in particular," in contrast to other identifications, increases the odds of embracing exclusive empiricism by 7.94 ($p < 0.01$) and believing in mortal finitude by 5.59 ($p < 0.01$).

In the context of gender, identifying as female reduces the odds of endorsing exclusive empiricism by 41.3% ($p < 0.01$) and believing in mortal finitude by 41.9% ($p < 0.01$). Each additional year of completed education augments the odds of being an exclusive empiricist by 13.4% ($p < 0.01$) and of believing in mortal finitude by 3.3% ($p < 0.1$). With each additional year in age, the odds of embracing exclusive empiricism decline by 0.8% ($p < 0.01$), while the odds of believing in mortal finitude rise by 0.8% ($p < 0.01$). Regarding other racial self-identifications, having reported one's racial identity as White increases the odds of endorsing exclusive empiricism by a factor of 2.027 ($p < 0.01$), although this variable does not significantly predict beliefs in mortal finitude.

DISCUSSION

Drawing on two datasets, one made up almost entirely of nonbelievers (the Secular Communities Survey; SCS) and one that is far more religiously heterogeneous and the gold standard of social scientific research on the United States (General Social Survey; GSS), we

examined the extent to which exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude are beliefs held by nonbelievers and the extent to which those beliefs are predictors of identifying as “atheist” or “agnostic.” The SCS illustrated that the vast majority of organized nonbelievers in our sample are exclusive empiricists who also agree with mortal finitude. This inspired our hypotheses that exclusive empiricists in the U.S. are likely to identify as “atheist” or “agnostic” and that atheists and agnostics in the U.S. are likely to be exclusive empiricists who believe in mortal finitude. We used measures of these two beliefs to predict self-identification as atheist or agnostic in the GSS and found that they are, indeed, strong predictors of atheist/agnostic self-identification in the general population. We also found that identifying as “atheist” or “agnostic” is a strong predictor of being an exclusive empiricist or believing in mortal finitude.

When self-identifying as an atheist or an agnostic, people are making a negative claim about their lack of or uncertainty about belief in God. But they are also likely to hold other, more affirmative beliefs that are consistent with a belief system in which God does not exist. As a result of our findings, we have come to a better understanding of what those who identify as atheist or agnostic believe. They are likely to be exclusive empiricists and likely to believe in mortal finitude in addition to not believing or being uncertain about their belief in God.

There are some nuances of secular beliefs that are important to understand when interpreting our analysis of the SCS and the GSS. 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 be a way to avoid stigma and promote social cohesion (Blankholm 2022; Edgell, Frost, and Stewart 2017). The SCS helps 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. 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 10.4% of GSS respondents identified as either atheist or agnostic.

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 an expression of 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 statements that can co-exist coherently, without contradiction. 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 like the GSS ask respondents to choose between the two on questions like “NORELGSP”: “Do you consider yourself to be atheist, agnostic, something else, or nothing in particular?” They also present the response options as mutually exclusive when asking participants their views toward the existence of a god or higher power, like on the GSS question “GOD,” which has been included in the survey since 1988. The

question 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.

To explore these challenges, we show our results for four different identities in Table 2. We have included those who identify as “nothing in particular” as a contrast, to demonstrate that our models do *not* show a relationship with exclusive empiricism or mortal finitude in either predictive direction. This is unsurprising given other research showing that they are a more heterogeneous group than atheists and agnostics (Campbell, Layman, and Green 2021). We have also included a combined identity, “atheist” *or* “agnostic,” in our GSS model as a way to acknowledge that both identities are plausible ways of signaling different aspects (ontology or epistemology) of the same underlying belief system. In other words, we see how it can be difficult for an exclusive empiricist who believes in mortal finitude to choose whether to identify as “atheist” or “agnostic;” for the same reason, they might also find it difficult to choose whether they do not believe in God or they are unsure. Combining atheist and agnostic allows us to test whether we might be right that some who share a belief in exclusive empiricism or mortal finitude can identify as “atheist” or “agnostic” in situations in which they are forced to choose.

Mortal finitude is a significant and meaningful predictor of agnosticism by itself (about 8% of the variation), but it ceases to be significant once the “unsure” about god variable is included. This means that mortal finitude does help predict identifying as agnostic, but its variation is actually being captured by other, better predictors once they are included in the

model. We find it reasonable and telling that “exclusive empiricism” is a stronger predictor of “agnostic” identity and that “mortal finitude” is a stronger predictor of “atheist” identity. After all, “agnostic” is a way to emphasize empirical humility about the existence of God, which extends to uncertainty about life after death. By contrast, “atheist” is a way to emphasize ontological confidence that neither God nor the afterlife exists.

We have described the complexities of secular beliefs because we want to emphasize the extraordinary agreement among nonbelievers on certain questions despite the many ways that they express their differences. Given the commonalities in their epistemological beliefs and their shared attitude toward death, atheists and agnostics can reasonably assert that they are both atheist and agnostic when asked about their belief in God 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 responding to the survey’s last question, which 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 identify as atheist or agnostic are likely to share certain basic beliefs. Our findings suggest that these beliefs could be common to all secular belief systems, though we cannot show that for certain. That exclusive empiricists and those who believe that death is the final end claim to be “atheist” or “agnostic” when asked about religion does not

mean that they define themselves based on their absence of belief in God. On the contrary, our results show that those are simply the best options that respondents have to express that they adhere to exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude, which are affirmative beliefs found in many if not all secular belief systems. 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; it is not random, nor is it nationally representative. This is why we have tested our hypotheses with the GSS. We have found that everyday people who are exclusive empiricists or believe in mortal finitude are likely to identify as “atheist” or “agnostic,” and that atheists and agnostics are likely to be exclusive empiricists and believe in mortal finitude.

There is nonetheless a clear gap between secular joiners and everyday atheists and agnostics. We think it is important to consider this gap and try to account for it in future research. Though organized nonbelievers develop a refined understanding of what “atheist” and “agnostic” mean in conversation with one another, we should not assume that the general public shares such a nuanced understanding. The meanings of particular words are often a source of disagreement because, according to semantic field theory, those meanings can vary across different communities of speakers (Kittay 1989, 214-257). Dialects are typical regional variations among users of the same language, and linguists have shown how terms can differ in meaning across social media communities (Lucy and Bamman 2021). For example, among those who participate in nonbeliever organizations in the United States, disagreements about whether to identify as “religious humanist,” “secular humanist,” or just “humanist” with no adjective have divided humanists since at least the 1960s and have contributed to major fractures in the humanist

community (Blankholm 2022). Ambiguous or polysemous terms can also have the opposite effect by uniting those who disagree sharply about certain meanings of a term but agree about others. A good example is “secularism,” which has several possible meanings and can unite disparate groups such as progressive atheists and conservative Christians when it means “separation of church and state” (Blankholm 2014).

In a recent edited volume, *Global Sceptical Publics*, a group of scholars introduced the concepts of “publics” and “counterpublics” to the study of nonbelievers (Copeman and Schulz 2022). Historian Eric Chalfant provides a helpful overview of the development of these concepts in his contribution to the volume (Chalfant, 244-268). In Chalfant’s words, “A public... comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation; a counterpublic, Chalfant shows, “marks itself off unmistakably from the dominant public” (245). In simplified terms, publics consume media from the same network of texts, and counterpublics are publics that understand themselves as counter to the dominant discourse. We consider the extent to which the general public in the United States shares organized nonbelievers’ understandings of the terms “atheist” and “agnostic” to be an open question for future research. Because sociologists have shown that atheists remain one of the least trusted minorities in the United States (Edgell et al. 2016), we suggest, following Chalfant, that nonbelievers are a counterpublic, signaling their minority and frequently oppositional status. We expect that they are a semantic community that is similar to but distinct from the general public.

Another limitation is the lack of nuance in our measures for exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude in the GSS. For example, Tatjana Schnell has developed scalar measures for secular beliefs like scientism, personal responsibility, and humanism (2015). Though our simplicity helps us identify two fundamental tenets that are likely to be uniquely shared by

atheists and agnostics, it does not enable us to observe subtle differences among secular identities and beliefs 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 can help us understand why 7.56% of GSS respondents who identify as “atheist” also claim to believe in God or a higher power. In the words of an atheist we interviewed while conducting ethnographic research on nonbelievers, “I believe in God if by God you mean nature.” Surveys cannot adequately capture this ambiguity, so a mixed methods approach remains crucial if researchers want to understand the beliefs of nonbelievers. 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).

While our results indicate that many atheists, agnostics, and other kinds of nonbelievers are exclusive empiricists who believe in mortal finitude, it is important to note that this is not true of everyone who identifies as “atheist” or “agnostic.” In the GSS, 88.62% of atheists and 83.72% of agnostics are exclusive empiricists; 91.36% of atheists and 66.87% of agnostics believe in mortal finitude. Though our findings suggest that believing in exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude are part of what it means to be secular for many people in the US, it overstates our results to suggest that exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude are the essence of what it means to be secular or nonreligious. Given the surprisingly high percentage of atheists and agnostics who believe in God or a higher power, claims about “atheist” and “agnostic” being essentially negative categories are also overstatements. As is the case with any group or category

of humans, there is diversity among secular Americans. Atheists and agnostics in the U.S. are likely to share beliefs in exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude, but not all of them do.

CONCLUSION

If we accept and take seriously the fact that those who identify as atheist or agnostic are likely to share certain beliefs—and that those who share those beliefs are likely to call themselves “atheist” or “agnostic,” 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 by demonstrating a statistically significant and substantively meaningful relationship between claiming an atheist or agnostic identity and sharing certain beliefs that are part of a variety of secular belief systems—and by showing that this relationship is predictive in both directions—we can help unify 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 is also important because it enables generalization, which is vital for both social science and everyday speech. In this essay, we have tried to balance a negative generalization about atheists and agnostics that pervades the social scientific discourse by pointing to the prevalence of certain affirmative beliefs that atheists and agnostics in the U.S. are likely to hold.

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 religious identity. 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, like the one that philosopher Charles Taylor has criticized (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 particular beliefs like 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 GSS)

	SCS (%) (n = 12,350)	GSS (%) (n = 3,951)
Atheist & Agnostic	86.08	10.40
Atheist	78.81	4.71
Agnostic	18.11	5.69
Not religious/None	23.6	2.61
Nothing in particular	3.68	12.20

Note. In SCS, the response categories are not mutually exclusive while in GSS respondents could choose only one option.

Table 2
Logistic regression models predicting identities

Predictors	Dependent variables			
	Atheist & agnostic	Atheist	Agnostic	Nothing in particular
			OR	
Exclusive Empiricism (1=Yes)	4.439*** (1.421)	2.635* (1.384)	5.376*** (2.124)	4.307*** (1.178)
There is no life after death. (1=Agree)	2.250** (0.744)	4.868*** (2.823)	1.215 (0.490)	1.625* (0.470)
I don't believe in God. (1=Agree)	11.22*** (4.174)	41.70*** (23.53)	0.631 (0.355)	1.061 (0.406)
Don't know/No way to find out. (1=Agree)	7.080*** (2.484)	6.254*** (3.712)	5.035*** (2.062)	1.918* (0.657)
Respondents sex (2=Female)	1.043 (0.272)	1.522 (0.544)	0.750 (0.231)	1.435 (0.329)
Highest year of school completed	1.043 (0.0522)	0.978 (0.0659)	1.080 (0.0642)	0.882*** (0.0355)
Age of respondent	0.977*** (0.00744)	0.983* (0.00993)	0.983* (0.00887)	0.989* (0.00645)
White as 1st mention (1=Yes)	1.035 (0.364)	1.100 (0.565)	0.967 (0.398)	0.907 (0.259)
Constant	0.0321*** (0.0274)	0.00863*** (0.0103)	0.0155*** (0.0160)	0.485 (0.326)
Pseudo R2	0.4196	0.4982	0.2462	0.1278

Note. S.E. in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Table 3
Logistic regression models predicting beliefs

Predictors	Dependent variables	
	Exclusive Empiricism	Mortal Finitude
	OR	
Atheist (1=Yes)	33.26*** (11.04)	11.28*** (2.129)
Agnostic (1=Yes)	20.92*** (5.809)	55.91*** (16.22)
Nothing in particular (1=Yes)	7.940*** (1.372)	5.590*** (0.702)
Respondents sex (2=Female)	0.587*** (0.0770)	0.581*** (0.0562)
Highest year of school completed	1.134*** (0.0286)	1.033* (0.0185)
Age of respondent	0.992** (0.00376)	1.008*** (0.00293)
White as 1st mention (1=Yes)	2.027*** (0.351)	1.099 (0.136)
Constant	0.0387*** (0.0180)	0.0859*** (0.0281)
Pseudo R2	0.2760	0.2009

Note. S.E. in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.