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THE LIMITS OF RELIGIOUS INDIFFERENCE

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Abstract

This essay explores religious indifference as an example of that which stands beyond the scope of social scientific knowledge production. In turn, it uses religious indifference to consider the social scientist's role in constituting the religion-related field. The literary character Bartleby and the ethnographic character Gino provide two case studies for examining particular types of religious indifference that cannot be known to the researcher. As fictions, they offer a way to explore that which would otherwise remain illegible, and they serve as humbling reminders of the inescapable limits of inquiry. To better understand the role that researchers play in constituting the religion-related field, this essay relies on other ethnographic examples to compare differing notions of "entanglement" and their implications for the study of nonbelievers and the nonreligious. The essay concludes by offering researchers a choice: to pursue religious indifference or to leave it alone.

Catching Myself Entangled

One of the central aims of this essay is to acknowledge the ways in which my fellow researchers and I participate in the construction of the religion-related field (Quack 2011, 2014; Quack and Schuh 2016 – this volume). Making myself the first object of study allows me to point to why social scientists favor certain methods and

ways of knowing, and in turn, allows me to mark the limits of our inquiry. This essay stems in part from the ethnographic research I have conducted among organized nonbelievers and secular activists in the United States. Surveying the landscape of America's nonbeliever organizations, I have attempted to show who is responsible for making the American secular (Blankholm 2015).

When I first began conducting fieldwork among nonbelievers in the United States, I was the most informal of participant observers. Living among a certain class of young people in New York City, almost any conversation about my profession as a Religious Studies graduate student became a discussion of religion and its oft-perceived opposite, atheism. Thankfully, I now have stock responses that I can use to steer the conversation away from a topic that most Americans consider private (Blankholm 2010). Though I would eventually focus my research solely on the members and leaders of nonbeliever organizations, my preliminary fieldwork was more exploratory. Several of those I interviewed did not join groups, either intentionally, because they found them too "religious," or without intention, simply uninterested. Some of these non-joiners considered themselves indifferent to religion. It did not matter much to them, and they found it strange that it would matter to me.

In those early conversations, my goal was to capture how people talk about nonreligion in everyday life (Bender 2003). Looking over my field notes, I find a mix of those who wanted to discuss religion and those who did not. According to one young woman who was born in China and has lived in the United States since she was a teenager, religion makes no sense to her because Taoism is not really a

religion, and she does not understand what the term is supposed to mean (see also

Fitzgerald 2007). In another interaction, a young man told me he does not think

about religion because it is not very important to him (see also Wallis 2014, 84).

Struggles to name and describe were so persistent that they became the central

question of my research even after I turned my focus to nonbeliever communities.

Conversations often centered on the inadequacy of labels for describing the various

ways in which people do or do not believe, behave, or belong religiously. Though in

those early stages of my research I did not ask those I spoke with how they identify

themselves, they often asked me, or they volunteered an answer, even when self-

identification made them uncomfortable. Some struggled to find the right words, as I

sometimes do when someone asks if I am religious. Not even my most interested

interlocutors found it very easy to declare themselves inscribed within the bounds

of a particular term.

　　　Why is it so hard to name oneself? Perhaps resistance to labels or the

challenge of description stems from a voluntarist desire to construct and select

one's own beliefs (Modern 2011). By rejecting how they fit into a larger history or

set of institutions, those eschewing common labels can reassert their individuality

(Bender 2010). Perhaps labels are always negotiated relationally, and social

encounters only temporarily reify recognition or identity (Day 2011). A list of

options or an open-ended question sets in motion a process of self-identification

that the researcher can observe in the reflexive speech of the informant (Day and

Lee 2014). I did not conduct enough interviews or participant observation among

the vaguely or somewhat nonreligious in order to claim with any authority why

many of those I spoke with found description so difficult. Their struggles and my perceptions of my own led me to focus my research on those who join nonbeliever communities and adopt self-conscious identities. Though organized nonbelievers do not always agree on labels, at least they name themselves.

Lee has confronted the challenges I sought to avoid by studying how those who identify as "not religious" or "nonreligious" understand "religious" things and their relationship to them (2012b; 2014; see also Day 2011). She has suggested terms that scholars should adopt when situating nonbelievers and the nonreligious in the context of broad concepts like secularism, secularity, and secularization (2012a; 2014). "Nonreligion," she asserts, describes "anything that is identified by how it differs from religion," including New Atheism and humanist life-cycle rituals (2014, 468-9). "Secularity" is linked to "secularization" and is "a concept used analytically to study the relative significance of religion" (469). In brief, "nonreligion" describes positive manifestations, affirmations, and avowals framed in contradistinction to religion, and secularity describes religion's negative decline, restriction, or marginalization.

I have not adopted Lee's divisions in my own work because the landscape of organized nonbelief in the United States includes avowedly *religious* humanists who are non-theistic and who often consider themselves secular. These individuals might join a humanist community like an Ethical Culture Society or a Society for Humanistic Judaism—groups that consider themselves religious, but which are also members of national organizations that advocate for nonbelievers, such as the Secular Coalition for America and Openly Secular. Describing all nonbelievers as

"nonreligious" would overlook the many instances of secular/religious hybridity in the United States and affirm a strong boundary between secular and religious that has not always existed and that not all nonbelievers share.

After conducting sixty-five in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the leaders and activists who run America's major nonbeliever organizations, I chose "nonbelievers" as an efficacious umbrella term to describe what they have in common. Some religious humanists I spoke with have objected to my using this term by arguing that they are "believers" who affirm humanism and its ethics. Though I mean an ellipsis for a longer phrase describing those who do not affirm belief in most conceptions of God or the supernatural, they are right to object because they belong to a tradition of non-theistic religious humanism that is more than a century old and grows out of a combination of Unitarianism and Auguste Comte's Religion of Humanity (Olds 1996). They have beliefs about the world that one could fairly label religious *or* nonreligious.

Digging into the intellectual history of nonbelievers reveals hundreds of years of debates over which practices and forms of organization are too religious or sufficiently secular. Those debates have generated much of the common nomenclature that scholars adopt, including the terms "humanism" and "secularism" (Blankholm 2014 and forthcoming). "Nonbelievers," like any single term, cannot be neutral and is always already part of a discursive inheritance (Foucault 2002 [1969]). Not even a neologism like "brights" is free from negative connotations, despite its being invented to avoid them (Dennett 2006, 21). Scholarly terms are no less overdetermined, even when contextualized by rigorous genealogical research

(Asad 1993; 2003; Day 2011). Elsewhere I have argued that American researchers, religious organizations, and organized nonbelievers are so discursively and institutionally entangled that the distinction between scholar and object of study is more of an efficacious fiction than the product of what Bourdieu has called "epistemological vigilance" (Blankholm 2015, forthcoming; Bourdieu 1988 [1984], xiii; see also Bender 2012).

Lee's terms arise from her research in the British context, and they are no less apt than mine. She identifies five ways in which people employ the terms "not religious" and "nonreligious" to affirm meaningful stances with respect to religion (2014, 469-70). Some use them as substitutes for other "nonreligious" labels like "atheist" or "humanist," either interchangeably or because they want to use a more socially polite placeholder (470-2). Others consider themselves "spiritual," but not "religious," and use "not religious" or "nonreligious" to emphasize that distinction (472). Still others use the terms to express "engaged indifferentism," or "non-nominalism" (472-476). The engaged indifferent, as opposed to the more passively indifferent, use generic descriptors to communicate a lack of "cultural attachment" to religion and to underscore its irrelevance (476). Non-nominalists want to avoid labels altogether and do so for a variety of reasons. By dissecting the generic labels of the religious field's surplus, Lee provides a precise vocabulary of the margins and enables social scientists to better locate the limits of their inquiry.

A Not Beyond the Religion-Related Field

In the remainder of this essay, I explore a version of the "non-nominal," which as Lee observes, sometimes overlaps with "engaged indifferentism" when indifference entails resistance to being inscribed within the religion-related field (see Quack 2014 and Quack and Schuh 2016 – this volume). The "non-nominal" I examine is different from Lee's, though similar. My appropriation delimits a boundary beyond which scholarly inquiry cannot proceed. In the two case studies I consider, the interviewee retreats from or refuses the researcher. From the perspective of the social scientist, this form of the non-nominal is the purest specimen of "religious indifference." If the non-nominalist does not name or even describe herself, she *de facto* refuses the differences that a researcher asserts. Despite the researcher's attempts to make the research subject recognize a difference between religion and nonreligion, the entirely indifferent non-nominalist persists in recognizing no difference. In so doing, the non-nominalist becomes a special kind of other for the researcher—a self that does not research.

Borrowing from Taylor (1993), the "non-nominal" is a "not" of denegation, which joins the distance between namer and named, etic and emic, distinction and indifference. By prodding and pulling at this "not," we cannot undo it, though we can come to understand how it only tightens more when we attempt to describe that which turns away from the differences our descriptions require. As I demonstrate in this essay's final section, recognizing the limits of our ability to produce knowledge helps us better understand the role played by indifference and its illegibility in constituting the religion-related field. It makes this field meaningful by standing

outside of it. For if the religion-related field contained everything, then why qualify it with an adjective? Would it not be *the field*, *in toto*?

In each of the following two sections I present a brief study of a fictional character in order to mark out the limit beyond which the non-nominalist stands. During my years of field research, numerous potential informants have declined to be interviewed, ignored my calls or emails, or even refused to speak to me during a face-to-face encounter. Though I have kept a record of only a handful of these occasions, I cannot glean much from them, and I do not know what these informants might have said had we spoken. In most of these cases, I cannot even call their non-response a refusal because doing so implies an intentional attempt to reject or turn away. Of course, their intentions remain opaque. Despite my desire to know their sincerely held beliefs, I am left guessing at the contents of their private minds (see Keane 2007). To speak of these informants, I must invent ethnographic characters—fictions—who can participate in my descriptions in a way that they never actually did. To underscore this guesswork and the fictions it demands, I now analyze two fictional characters who appear to refuse participation.

The first character is Bartleby, the literary invention of Herman Melville and the title character of a short story he published in 1853 (1949). The second character is Gino, an ethnographic invention described by the sociologists Michel Callon and Vololona Rabeharisoa (2004). By choosing two very different sorts of characters, I want to emphasize that they are fictions not because they were never once flesh and blood, but because we cannot know them. Drawing from the descriptions their authors provide, I will attempt to elicit from them their thoughts

concerning religion. Though I will fail—both because they are fictions and because they do not respond—I remain certain that they will reveal much about the limits and nature of our scholarly exploration of the religion-related field.

Bartleby: I would prefer not to

In Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street," an unnamed elderly lawyer recalls his experiences with a mysterious man whom he describes as "one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources" (3). After an uptick in business, the lawyer hires a third copyist: Bartleby. Though at first he seems like a model employee, working "silently, palely, mechanically" to transcribe documents day and night (16), when the lawyer asks him to proof-check a copy, Bartleby responds with his singular refrain: "I would prefer not to" (18). As the lawyer begins to observe him more closely, he realizes that Bartleby never leaves the office and subsists solely on ginger cakes he buys from the errand-boy. When he tests Bartleby by asking him to go to the post office around the corner, he responds in his usual way: "I would prefer not to." He then asks Bartleby if he *refuses* to go—"You *will* not?"—and Bartleby clarifies: "I *prefer* not." (27). Frustrated at first, the lawyer eventually resigns himself to Bartleby's persistent near-refusal.

Stopping by his office one Sunday morning before church, the lawyer finds Bartleby inside, half-dressed, after having slept on the couch. In an act of sympathy, he allows him to stay: "What miserable friendlessness and loneliness are here revealed! His poverty is great; but his solitude, how horrible!" (33). Soon after,

Bartleby declines to do any more copying, and when the lawyer fires him and tells him to leave, he prefers not to. Though he begins to stand for hours at a time "in dead-wall reveries" (35), the lawyer again grows an affection for him and tolerates his presence in the office. When Bartleby begins to make visitors feel uncomfortable, the lawyer worries for his reputation and rents new offices in order to avoid removing him. The new tenant has Bartleby arrested, and when the lawyer visits him in jail, he bribes the "grub-man" (65) to make sure he receives enough food. Despite his efforts, when he returns to the jail to visit Bartleby a few days later, he finds him curled up against the wall in the jail yard, dead from starvation after having preferred not to eat.

With Bartleby, the "inscrutable scrivener," (47) Melville has created a masterpiece of indifference and illegibility. In his preference to "not," he is both passive and opaque. His apparent will is stubborn and unresponsive to the demands of others, and yet he is unimposing and leaves no trace beyond the memories of those who knew him. As a scrivener, he merely copies and creates no text of his own, but he prefers not to even passively ventriloquize when the lawyer asks him to read aloud to check for errors. Bartleby never reveals anything about his personal history. He does not respond to "common usage" and "common sense" (21), and when the lawyer implores him "to be reasonable," he gives only a "mildly cadaverous reply": "At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable" (39). The "unaccountable Bartleby" (53) is beyond the reach of knowing.

Because the lawyer resents the pity he feels for Bartleby, he refuses to accept that Bartleby might desire to remain unreachable or not desire at all. He can only

imagine that Bartleby possesses a suffering inner self: "I might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach" (36). Though he offers him money and help finding a new job, Bartleby never accepts. He has been reduced to the function of a machine, transcribing without thought. Yet he appears to continue to will, however passively, even against what seem to be his interests. The lawyer's strange diagnosis gives insight into what ails Bartleby: "[T]he scrivener was the victim of innate and incurable disorder" (36). Without an indefinite article to qualify his disorder, Bartleby is not the victim of *a* disorder; he is the victim of disorder itself. He prefers not to be ordered.

If read as a story of religious indifference, "Bartleby" and its title character's seemingly willful passivity refigure the challenges facing social scientists of the religion-related field. Fired from a previous job at the Dead Letter Office after a new boss was hired, Bartleby resembles the demographic surplus that surveyors face when religious definitions and perceptions undergo a shift. The "religiously unaffiliated," the "nones," and the "nonreligious" are "catch-all, residual" categories (Bullivant 2012, 104; Pasquale 2007) and symptoms of a survey in need of revision (Hout and Fischer 2002, 615-16; Day 2013, 107). Over time, survey questions become increasingly like dead letters. Those being surveyed do not acknowledge themselves as the recipients and perhaps do not even recognize the language of the sender. They return the letters unopened, responding without answering. In reply to social scientists' attempts to make them into objects of research, potential respondents offer only a mildly cadaverous, "I prefer not to."

Researchers might reasonably ask, "Prefer not to what, exactly?" They must parse religion into belief, behavior, and belonging in order to isolate and disentangle the "nots." To which aspect of religion would Bartleby prefer not? What if a respondent is legible within the surveyor's categories of behavior and belonging, but remains inscrutable on questions of belief? And like Bartleby's lawyer, surveyors press their inquiry: "You *prefer* not to, or you *will* not?" The two verbs are not the same, and their difference matters when taking account (Voas and Ling 2010). After dissecting the contents of the religiously unaffiliated, the secular, and the otherwise religiously indifferent, social scientists can revise and refine their instruments and interpellate their addressees more successfully (Althusser 1971). They receive fewer "nots" in response because they have asked questions that make their respondents more legible.

As religiously indifferent, Bartleby aggravates with his "passive resistance" (24). His "nots" cannot be disentangled. Like the informant who refuses or ignores, he does not offer his personal history, and he leaves no secondary trace. Researchers are left in the position of the lawyer-narrator, relying on the available data to convey whatever little they can. Researchers who use methods designed to find Bartleby and elicit his response are more successful in making sense of him, but they can never capture that which they do not elicit (Day 2011; Wallis 2014). Even when prodded with precision, Bartleby prefers not to. Some survey questions will go unanswered, and some informants will never respond. Unaccountable Bartleby looms in a dead-wall reverie.

Gino: 'I' am not the 'I' that you want 'me' to be

In an article entitled, "Gino's Lesson on Humanity: Genetics, Mutual Entanglements and the Sociologist's Role," Callon and Rabeharisoa interpret their experience interviewing a man who suffers from limb-girdle muscular dystrophy (LGMD) (2004). "The sociologists," as they refer to themselves, and as I will refer to them hereafter, are studying the influence of patients' organizations on medical research and seeking first-hand accounts from those involved (Callon and Rabeharisoa 2008). They visit Gino at his home on the island of La Réunion, a French colony roughly 1,000 kilometers east of Madagascar. Gino's brother, Léon, is the charismatic vice-chairman of the Réunion Island Muscular Dystrophy Association (ARM) and is municipal councilor of a village in an area containing around 30 families affected by LGMD. According to Léon, Gino is "pretty unsociable" and "really withdrawn" (2), and though Léon has introduced the sociologists to other patients, he has been unable to convince his brother to meet them.

When they finally do interview Gino, he is affable, but quiet and disengaged. The sociologists report, "It was difficult to get anything out of him other than a few mumbled and sometimes inaudible words" (3). His muscular dystrophy is not as severe as Léon's, but bad enough that he was dismissed from his job as a welder two years before. Though at times responsive, he mostly allows his wife or brother to speak for him, either nodding or smiling in agreement, or giving no signal at all. He only joins the conversation in three brief exchanges, and each involves a refusal: of treatment for himself, of participation in the ARM, and of testing to see whether his

children have the disease. At one point during the conversation, he announces to no one in particular, "I like football" (4).

Attempting to account for Gino's reticent behavior and his three refusals, the sociologists construct a character named Gino, whom they build around the bits of information they already have. Like Bartleby, he is "one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources" (Melville 3), and like the lawyer, the sociologists struggle to make sense of their encounter with a mysterious man who "refuses to hear and to understand" (Callon and Rabeharisoa 2004, 10). By narrating themselves as "the sociologists" and analyzing "the interview situation as a model of the public arena on a reduced scale" (6), they "suggest an interpretation that takes the question of sociological interventionism seriously, including the effects it has when it makes reluctant actors talk and imposes questions on them in which they have very little interest" (6). The Gino they create and interpret is not merely refusing or retreating, but actively adopting a way of being that the sociologists foreclose by interviewing him. His silence does not reflect "stupidity" (10), and his refusal of knowledge is better understood as a refusal to enter their arena: "He is opting, or at least that is our assumption, for another form of morality and intelligence" (15). Like Bartleby, Gino is a "not," and the lesson he teaches the sociologists is equally helpful for the study of religious indifference.

The sociologists apply two related concepts to interpret Gino's refusals: entanglement and articulation. "Entanglements" are the attachments to people and things that constitute a particular actor or object (16). Gino, as they imagine him, refuses to be entangled in ways that will reshape him and transform his moral

obligations. The technical application of scientific discoveries "causes the proliferation of new entities that bring with them unexpected webs of relations and potential entanglements" (17; see also Latour 1999). If Gino accepts that there are things called "genes," then their existence has implications. The genetic science that says his children might be carriers of his disease without ever manifesting symptoms creates a moral imperative for him to change his behavior by getting them tested. His acceptance of genetic science would transform his ontology and reposition his role within it: "The collective is redistributed, reshaped; the compassion takes new routes that are mapped by genetics" (17). Because he loves his children, this scientific knowledge that Gino has long avoided hearing, and which his brother presents in front of the sociologists, creates an obligation. From the perspective of those who already accept this ontology, "Either he understands and he is monstrous, or he does not understand and is nothing but an idiot" (18). Rather than affirm their visceral reactions, the sociologists speculate that he is neither. Gino appears to refuse to accept this new network of attachments and the reconfiguration they demand.

The concept of "articulation" helps the sociologists explain why Gino's refusal of new entanglements manifests as monstrosity or ignorance. Like the lawyer asking after the suffering of Bartleby's soul, they wonder about Gino's inner life and the sort of will he might conceal: "Why do the sociologists that we are have the feeling that Gino's hesitant words and silence are intended to hide something from us? Is there a real Gino hiding from us?" (19). Unlike the lawyer, they observe themselves asking, and they make their assumptions an object of inquiry. They scrutinize their

belief that Gino is a subject with private and public selves, and they acknowledge that they have judged him for not summoning his private self to answer their questions and submit his opinions to public debate. In the act of interviewing, they *de facto* demand that he articulate his thoughts for public presentation. Because "there is no public space that does not carry with it moral normativity" (22), he must edit and affect his private self in order to articulate it. The sociologists are an "attentive and silent" audience, and their questions impose an obligation on Gino to correspond to both their norms of public articulation and their norms of moral judgment.

If Gino articulates his refusal, he is monstrous because he has become entangled in the ontology of the sociologists and his brother. He has submitted himself to becoming one who articulates a private self in public statements, which are subject to public norms and debate. If he refuses to articulate, he is ignorant, and in a way, still monstrous from the perspective of those who *know* and thus expect him to behave differently. This is Gino's double bind, created by the demand that he double himself. In those three moments of participation, which are also the moments of his three refusals, he becomes a particular kind of subject: an autonomous in-dividual who is, ironically, divided into private and public, interior and exterior (21). In the interpretation of the sociologists, Gino's refusals are not attempts to "safeguard his intimacy or private life;" "What he is resisting is a certain way of simultaneously defining *both* the private *and* the public spheres" (13; emphasis in original).

Gino is thus a sort of non-nominalist. Articulating his interiority would reshape him into a new kind of subject, entangled in a new ontology. His non-articulation declines the differences the sociologists assert. He can remain ignorant only if they choose to ignore him. Standing at the edge, he is a limit case of indifference; he is a "not" that cannot be disentangled:

> In the range of possible forms of encounterings-confrontations, Gino's interview occupies a singular, extreme, position. Gino accepts the confrontation but reduces it to its simplest expression. His silence is interrupted only by the painful confession of his will to remain ignorant. The only point at which he accepts the form of agency proposed by Léon is when he says that he refuses it: 'I' don't want to know, which paradoxically means: 'I' am not the 'I' that you want 'me' to be. (24)

Chastened by Gino's lesson, the sociologists suggest a new approach that attends to "the limits and conditions of sociological inquiry" (24). Actors being studied can refuse, can remain opaque, and can choose their "mutual entanglement"—all without being interpellated as "free-willed, autonomous and responsible individual subject[s]" (6). His lesson helps describe the limit approached by scholars of religious indifference.

In the following two sections, I borrow the concepts the sociologists use to interpret Gino and apply them to the study of religious indifference. In the first, I discuss some of my own ethnographic characters and introduce another kind of entanglement described by Bender (2010, 5-18) in order to examine the social scientist's role in constructing the religion-related field. How do social scientists entangle the subjects of their research—and how are researchers and those they study already entangled? In the second, I borrow from an essay by Baudrillard (1985) to demonstrate how a subject can perform as an object and embrace a more

passive kind of indifference than that of Gino. In the essay's conclusion, I synthesize these explorations of entanglement and ignorance, and I present researchers with a choice.

Caught in the Act of Making Labels

Since the early 2000s, all of the major nonbeliever organizations in the United States have grown in membership, budgets, and staff. For example, during an interview at their headquarters in Madison, Wisconsin in December of 2012, one of the leaders of the Freedom From Religion Foundation told me that the group considers itself to be "the largest expressly atheist and agnostic organization in the country." They currently have around 20,000 dues-paying members, which is 4 times the amount they had in 2004. Like other groups, their budget has grown in recent years, and as of early 2016, they employ more than half a dozen attorneys. Larger budgets and new outreach opportunities afforded by the internet (Smith and Cimino 2012) have also enabled organizations to fund initiatives aimed at growing membership and encouraging more Americans to identify with labels like atheist, humanist, and freethinker (Cimino and Smith 2007).

A number of scholars have observed that America's major nonbeliever organizations have played an important role in the process of identity formation among nonbelievers (Cimino and Smith 2011; J.M. Smith 2011, 2013; LeDrew 2013; Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013; Kettell 2014). For example, leaders from the Secular Coalition for America (SCA), the movement's largest lobbying organization, told me that one of their founding goals was to unite groups that had spent the

previous decades fighting with one another. Since its founding in 2002, SCA has

grown to a coalition of 18 organizations and now includes all of the major groups in

the country (Blankholm 2014; Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013). Their current

president, David Niose, is the former president of the American Humanist

Association, and he was the lead attorney for a lawsuit that challenged the inclusion

of "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance by arguing that humanists should be

protected as a religious minority (*Doe v. Acton-Boxborough School District* 2014). He

is also author of *Nonbeliever Nation: The Rise of Secular Americans*, in which he

encourages nonbelievers to "come out" by publicly claiming a "secular" identity

(2012).

Niose's strategy is not unique among secular activists. In 2007, the Richard

Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science (RDF) started the Out Campaign, which

modeled its efforts on the gay rights movement. In April 2014, RDF, SCA, the Secular

Student Alliance, and the Stiefel Freethought Foundation joined together to found

Openly Secular, a coalition that also encourages nonbelievers to adopt a "secular"

identity and considers gay rights activism a model for its strategy. In the months

after its founding, all of America's major nonbeliever groups signed on as partners.

Though in their public rhetoric, organizational leaders sometimes cite data

from Pew and other polling organizations to trumpet the rising numbers of "secular"

Americans (Funk, Smith, and Lugo 2012; Blankholm 2014), during interviews and

conversations, they were more guarded. As one leader cautioned when explaining

his organization's goals, "The 'nones' aren't necessarily atheists." Several told me

that they consider religious disaffiliation an opportunity, but not a guarantee. For

instance, Marcus, one of the leaders of the Humanist Community at Harvard (HCH),

warned against the simplification of polling data, and his observations are worth

quoting at length:

> I think that the movement is in an interesting position because I see this time
> as one of huge potential and quite significant danger. We're looking at a
> demographic landscape that's never been better for nonreligious
> organizations in this country. More and more people are identifying as
> nonreligious or functionally nonreligious. A recent Gallup poll—Gallup or
> Pew, one of the two—said that 30% of Americans were nonreligious by its
> reckoning. Not by their own definition, but by their reckoning of their
> behavior. Not young Americans, all Americans. That's a massive demographic
> shift. And those people, in my view, are potentially our people if we work out
> how to reach them and activate them, energize them, excite them. [...] I think
> there's a huge opportunity right now, and my concern is we'll miss it because
> we'll fight with each other, which always happens. We won't take seriously
> the challenges of actually organizing people. We'll do what [the organization]
> American Atheists tends to do and say, "Oh, 30% of people are atheists!
> We're done. We've won the cultural war." It's like, "Well, that's absurd." They
> always use the figures wrong. They never use them with sufficient nuance or
> care.

During the same interview, Marcus quoted directly from Putnam and Campbell's

American Grace in order to emphasize the importance of creating "morally intense,

nonreligious social networks" (2010, 361). I had read the book not long before our

interview, and I recognized the passage immediately. Talking to Marcus and

listening to the ways in which he parsed categories and observed their efficacy

reminded me of myself and my fellow scholars. In the emerging field of secular

studies, we have struggled to find labels and descriptions that both capture what we

find in the field and resonate productively with scholarly theories and models.

Marcus showed me that he and I were entangled, not just in our discourse, but in

our very endeavors.

During her fieldwork among spiritual practitioners in Cambridge,

Massachusetts, Bender (2010) found that scholars who study spirituality are deeply

entangled with those who practice it (5-18). Like Marcus, practitioners read

scholarly research and appropriate its theories and technical terms for their own

ends. The conversations that Bender had with her informants took place in a shared

discursive space that could not be easily divided into etic and emic. As a researcher,

she found herself "caught… in a web of relations" (15). This mutual entanglement

shapes the construction of concepts like "spirituality," and Bender urges scholars to

include entanglements as objects of their research (2012, 67). During my fieldwork

among the leaders of American nonbeliever organizations, I also found myself

frequently entangled in the discursive web that I share with my informants. Caught

together in the "not" of researcher and researched (Taylor 1993), we each play our

part in the ongoing reconstruction of the American secular.

For instance, one leader named Greg invoked Alfred Korzybski's dictum that

"the map is not the territory" in order to make a point about language that he

emphasized throughout our interview (1958). Though he did not mention Korzybski

by name, his use of the analogy was apt: "I'm not an atheist," he told me. "It's a little

presumptuous to say you're anything. To say you're anything isn't totally true. You

get into the old Wittgensteinian word games again. What do you mean by God? Well,

everything is God. OK, then I'll go for that." In Greg's perspective, words like "God"

and "religious" are analogous to maps that represent territory, but which are not the

territory itself. Because no word can ever perfectly circumscribe reality, words are

always representations, which, like maps, simplify in order to achieve certain ends.

Jonathan Z. Smith has made a similar point using the same phrase from Korzybski

(1978). Smith observes, as Greg does, that life often disrupts the map that religion (or science) makes of it, and all maps struggle with incongruity (289-309). When talking with Marcus and with Greg, I am thrown back upon my own caughtness and become aware of our mutual entanglements. I am also aware of the limits I face when trying to create a reliable map that includes everyone from religious humanists to anti-religious atheists. Is it possible to create a map that includes the indifferent?

Pairing Bender's notion of entanglements with that of the sociologists (Callon and Rabeharisoa) refigures the mutual entanglements of nonbelievers and those who study them. For the sociologists, "entanglement" describes the things, such as genes, that researchers, scientists, and others with authority create and proliferate. Bender's notion is more grounded in discourse, affording less ontological reality to the "things" that researchers name. The two are closely related, and they both denegate the distinction between etic and emic (see Taylor 1994, 595). The sociologists flatten the distinction by viewing human subjects and things as actors in a network of nodes reconstituted by their changing attachments. Bender "nots" the distinction by demonstrating how social scientists and the subjects of their research constitute their shared discourse, though each side still depends on the distance and differences that distinguish them. The researcher needs a non-self to study, and in the case of my own work, nonbelievers rely on the authority of scholars to support the ways they use language, interpret data, and make arguments. We constitute each other in both sameness and difference.

By concerning themselves with the religion-related field, and especially by

dissecting the categories "not religious" and "nonreligious" in order to revise and refine survey instruments, social scientists produce new things, or labels, which they hope will better entangle those they study. Researchers navigate a complicated web of stated and tacit entanglements. The stated entanglements are the identities that individuals affirm, even nonreligious ones; the tacit entanglements are those that researchers identify despite what the individual affirms. From the flat perspective of the sociologists, these entanglements are all equally real and equally constructed, no matter who brought them into being. From Bender's more discursive perspective, researchers share their language with nonbelievers and bear the burden of constructing the distance and difference needed to maintain the boundary between researcher and researched.

Regardless of the ontological reality one attributes to the things that researchers produce, nonbelievers and social scientists resemble one another in their attempts to create categories that individuals will recognize as authentically representative of their inner selves (Keane 2007) and thus acceptable to affirm publicly via the media of surveys and interviews. As Day has shown (2011), this is not a simple process of matching external and internal, but a complex dialogue that occurs within networks of social relations, often among those with unequal access to power. Nonbelievers and social scientists are both engaged in a world-making poetics—a *poiēsis* (Heidegger 1977 [1954])—but they differ in their entangled constitutions because they are embedded in different projects. Nonbelievers who create new sub-movements like the brights or Atheism+ are experimenting with new categories that they hope will entangle more people. For them, the fact/value

distinction—the "is" and the "ought"—is fully blurred because they want to mobilize those they entangle in a purpose-driven social movement (Kettell 2014). They are looking for the most effective label for accomplishing their activist ends. And though researchers are ostensibly invested in accurate description and must perform distance and difference from their objects of research, they must also borrow from the terms and labels of their informants in order to create the finely tuned categories that are more likely to capture them and their private beliefs (see Latour 1993). Bartleby is hard to talk to, but learning to speak like him is one approach to getting him to respond.

Social scientists are entangled in a vast international network of governments, universities, grant-making foundations, religious and nonreligious organizations, and other actors and institutions that both support and appropriate the research they produce. Because of the role they play, and in order to affirm their authority, they must perform an ontologically precarious distinction between facts and values, is and ought, de-scription and pre-scription (Callon 2007). Other nodes in their network make values-based decisions in order to fund and otherwise encourage certain research, and those who read that research appropriate it for a variety of normative ends. Researchers must produce knowledge that qualifies as objective according to agreed-upon standards, and they must attend to the distinction between facts and norms. Sociologists like Smith et al. (2013) and Gorski (2012), have argued in recent years that social scientists should embrace their role in constructing values rather than continue to perform the necessarily incomplete acts of separation that make them "objective." Put differently, they argue that

scholars should become ignorant to these distinctions in order to affirm a new kind

of sociology, as Gino attempted to remain ignorant in order to affirm another kind of

humanity. This is our entangled "not."

Opacity, Transparency, and Objects

With the help of Baudrillard, I want to distinguish the opaque indifference of

Bartleby and Gino from a different, more transparent sort. In an essay on "the

masses" and polling (1985), Baudrillard develops two lines of argument, both of

which are helpful for thinking about the problems of entanglement and articulation

as they relate to the religiously indifferent. In the first, he considers the

consequences of successful polling, which produce a high fidelity representation of

the masses for their own consumption. By revising categories with more and more

precision, researchers "overinform" the objects of their research and create a

tautological circuit (580):

> Through this feedback, this incessant anticipated accounting, the social loses
> its own scene. It no longer enacts itself; it has no more time to enact itself; it
> no longer occupies a particular space, public or political; it becomes confused
> with its own control screen.

The pollster can observe changes in the composition of the categories, but if the

categories themselves are perfectly encompassing, then the field is complete, and

the masses have been reduced to "useless hyperinformation which claims to

enlighten them, when all it does is clutter up the space of the representable and

annul itself in a silent equivalence" (580). If the categories of the researcher and the

object of research are perfectly aligned, they cannot produce anything other than

the expected result. Misalignment—unexpected results—is the basic condition of novelty.

High fidelity polling in which respondents fit with researchers' expectations is only possible when the mass, as Baudrillard also calls it, is complicit. He thus describes a "de-volition" or a "secret strategy" in which the mass desists from its own will (584). This is Baudrillard's perverse inversion: by abnegating its will, the mass has unburdened itself of its transcendence, and for its "greater pleasure," it has compelled the "so-called privileged classes" toward its "secret ends" (586). Embracing passivity, it no longer needs to will itself and can conform completely. By playing along with the language game of the researcher, the object of study does not have to do the difficult, creative work of generating a self for public representation. The object of research becomes entirely knowable, never preferring not to. In the process, the object of the mass becomes invisible in plain sight: it is transparent. Because the will is normatively privileged, the mass "is violently reproached with this mark of stupidity and passivity" by the classes to which it delegates its will (586). It is not possible to know if the mass is more than it appears because it dumbly offers no more than what is expected. By being fully knowable, the mass is supposedly understood. If the researcher does not become too suspicious of its transparency, the mass can be, in a sense, ignored.

In a second, related line of argument, Baudrillard suggests that the inherent imperfectability of polls makes them objects of "derision and play" (581). They are, for the masses, a kind of spectacle or game (581), and they hold up an "ironic mirror" that reflects both their ability to influence the outcome of the poll and the poll's

inability to produce an accurate simulation. Tacitly, the mass demands the production of spectacles for its consumption. It enlists the researcher to do the work of ascertaining for it an understanding of itself, which it then merely affirms. Rather than identify and pursue its wants, the mass delegates to others who tell it what to desire. The mass does not, for instance, entertain itself, as both subject and object of the verb *to entertain*. It *is* entertained, passively, thereby tasking the researcher with its entertainment. The researcher produces an image of the mass, a study, that supposedly describes it, but which can only reproduce its own logic and assumptions. The mass enjoys the pleasure of being spectator to its supposed self through the act of polling. The campaigns encouraging people to write "Jedi Knight" as their religion in the last two UK Censuses are symptoms of this mirrored, ironic engagement (Voas 2014, 117-18). The mass appreciates these surveys for their misrecognition. In their appearance of totality and through their derisive subversion, surveys remind the mass of the ineffectuality of the state and the imperfectability of the representative powers of the media. The residual of polling is the fun part.

In Baudrillard's model, Bartleby and Gino are not objects because they are not complicit. The "object" is a kind of indifference that "disappears" (583) in a field because it aligns its will so thoroughly with the expectations of the researcher. Its legibility is so complete that it becomes transparent; it goes-along to get-along, and it camouflages itself in the process. Bartleby and Gino are different. Non-tautological, they stand in the generative space beyond the circuit, to which the researcher must always react. They stand in the opaque surplus of the researcher's categories precisely because they refuse to play along. They are living challenges, but only alive

as fictions that the researcher creates in order to understand that which remains uninscribed. The lawyer-narrator cannot grasp Bartleby, so he tells us his story. The sociologists cannot know Gino, so they credit him with affirming another kind of humanity. In these acts of *de facto* refusal, Bartleby and Gino are more available than objects, but they remain inscrutable. They are ignorant, and they prefer to be ignored.

Pausing for Religious Indifference

In this essay, I have explored religious indifference as a way to delimit the religion-related field and consider the role of the researcher in its constitution. In Bartleby, Melville creates a literary character who remains unaccountable, "preferring to not" even to the point of death. With Gino, the sociologists create an ethnographic character to teach us a lesson about entanglement and articulation and explain why some informants should be left alone. Bender's notion of entanglement is somewhat different, focusing on the ways in which researchers and those they study can co-constitute discourse, assumptions, and aims. Baudrillard has helped to demonstrate the tautological circuits that complex entanglements can produce. Caught within these loops, research subjects become transparent objects who play along, unlike the refusing Bartleby and Gino.

Taken together, these opaque, *de facto* refusals and transparent acts of de-volition are the persistently inscrutable artifacts of social scientific knowledge production. They are limit cases—extremes that are unlikely to find exact correlates in practice, though any social scientist would have to acknowledge that not every

subject agrees to become an object of study and thus remains illegible. The researched are more commonly something in between, sometimes affirming and fitting snugly within the researchers' categories and assumptions, and at other times struggling to translate their self-understandings into something legible for study. Religious indifference in its extreme—as the refusal to acknowledge difference— marks the limit beyond which scholarly inquiry, with its need for distinctions, cannot proceed. It also tantalizes as a source of novelty; it offers the unknown, and perhaps, the unknowable.

Forgetting for a moment that Bartleby and Gino are fictions, it can be tempting to ask what motivates their ignorance and their seemingly willful desire to ignore and to be ignored. Why must a researcher question that her informants have wills, that they have private selves, and that upon request, they could present these selves publicly for consumption as data? It can also be tempting to suggest that the challenges raised by religious indifference are surmountable and merely require new categories and rigorous methods that can inscribe more fully and create better, more accurate representations of the real. Within the assumptions that prevail among social scientists, these are the right questions to ask. And yet, what I have tried to describe is a more basic problem. Religious indifference has provided an occasion for exploring the assumptions required to produce social scientific knowledge. This production requires complicity from its objects—namely, that they should be subjects of a certain sort, who play along, but not too much. They should give us a little bit of surprise and invent something new, but still remain legible or

mostly so. Silently looming over every attempt to describe are the indifferent, opaque, and often ignored.

In a lecture that Pierre Bourdieu gave at the French Association for the Sociology of Religion in Paris in December of 1982, he warned those in attendance of the need to separate themselves from that which they study: the religious field (Bourdieu 2010). "[I]t is for each sociologist to ask," he told them, "in the interest of their own research, when he speaks about religion, whether he wants to understand the struggles in which religious things are at stake, or to *take part* in these struggles" (2). Those with an interest in the religious field belong to it: "Interest," according to Bourdieu, "in its true sense, is what is important to me, what makes *differences* for me (which do not exist for an *indifferent* observer because *it is all the same* to him)" (3). A scientific sociology of religion—an objective sociology—requires indifference to religion. Further, this indifference cannot be an unstudied one; it must arise from intention, as an affected state, effecting an "epistemological break, [which] works through a social break, which itself supposes a (painful) objectivation of bonds and attachments" (6). Even severing social ties might be insufficient because "words borrowed from religious language" could provide an unconscious vehicle for religious assumptions.[1] A scientific sociology of religion can only be produced by a sociologist who has gone through a process of self-"objectivation," severing her relationship to the religious field by assuring that it *makes no difference.* Religious indifference is a special kind of indifference because "religion" so often stands in for "norms." Interest in it is antithetical to "objectivation."

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[1] Ibid.

This, too, should give us pause. If it is all the same to the observer, then why name a thing religion? We return again to this question of *the field*, qualified by an adjective or *in toto*. What makes the religious field *religious* if there is no difference, and why does the researcher want to inscribe certain things within it while leaving other things outside? The same could and should be said of the religion-related field. If indifference is really the aim of the social scientist of religion, then we ought to consider why it is that we are so concerned with interpellating subjects of research and putting them into relation with religion. What difference does it make to us? Does it really make none? The production of social scientific knowledge requires fictions: characters like Bartleby and Gino, of course, but also the fictional distinctions between private and public, emic and etic, and facts and norms.

When paired as a phrase, religious and indifference become a terse, eloquent reminder of both the transparency of entanglement and the opacity of ignorance. Objects we engage agree to become subjects for our studies so that we can make them objects once more and aggregate them in narratives that apparently have no interest in the religious or religion-related fields. Those objects who do not agree, we exclude, and they remain illegible and unknown, insignificant by definition because they have failed to signify and we have been unable to relay their signals. Outliers, inscrutable scriveners, unaccountable Bartlebys, they are not the I's that we wish them to be, so we continue on without them, as if they do not exist. Religious indifference is the ever-retreating limit beyond inquiry. As we improve our methods and entangle the indifferent in the religion-related field, they are no longer indifferent, having been brought into relation with religion and asked to

recognize the differences that we also recognize (apparently despite our indifference).

Religious indifference is thus a challenge to the scholar because it asks her to reflect on her aims. If religious indifference is a threat to the expansion of the religious or religion-related fields, then the scholar must shine light on this darkness. If it is a fragile outside deserving of protection, then the scholar must ignore it and stop producing descriptions that demand its participation and account for it in an ever-widening field—no longer religious, but always standing in relation. Here we are at the heart of the thing. Religious indifference demands of us that we ask what it is we are doing, why we are doing it, and what will be different once we have done it. It is a fiction that thrusts us back upon our fictions, calls our attention to our entanglements, and delimits the boundary of our inquiries. It stands outside, daring us to pursue it or ignore it. Do we inscribe it, or do we allow it to remain indifferent? Regardless of whether we give chase, we ought to pause for a moment to wonder what we intend to do with religious indifference once we catch it. We should also worry more than a little about what might happen if it catches us.

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