

## Article



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## Atheism Looking In: On the Goals and Strategies of Organized Nonbelief

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**Abstract** | This exploratory study contributed to research on nonbelievers, their communities, and the atheist movement in general by dividing nonbelievers (N=1,939) into four groups based on degree of formal affiliation and assessing attitudes, perceptions, and preferences in three areas. First, we examined the preferences of nonbelieving group members (“secular affiliates”), former members, and nonbelieving non-members (“secular nonaffiliates”) on nonbeliever group goals, functions, and activities. Second, we examined the perceptions of secular affiliates regarding why secular nonaffiliates do not join nonbeliever groups as well as the reasons given by secular nonaffiliates as to why they do not join these groups. Third, we asked a series of questions on nonbelievers’ preferences around how to best approach religion and religious individuals. Seventy-seven percent of all respondents opted for the group goal of charitable contributions and humanitarian activities, while only 23% of all respondents selected “proselytizing” as a desirable group goal. Secular nonaffiliates’ strongest reason for not joining groups was that joining such groups was a low priority for them, followed by nonbelief not being a salient part of their identity. Notably, approximately one third of secular nonaffiliates indicated that they would join such groups if they were locally available. Neither maximum accommodation nor confrontation with religion was indicated by a majority of nonbelievers, though more respondents opted for accommodation (60%) than confrontation (25%). Most respondents indicated that their willingness to attack or ridicule religion was not absolute, but rather context dependent.

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**Guest Editors** | John R. Shook PhD, Ralph W. Hood Jr. PhD, and Thomas J. Coleman III

## Introduction

Over the past decade scholars have devoted increasing attention and resources to the study of secularists, humanists, atheists, freethinkers, and nonreligion in general (Pasquale, 2012). This rise in research interest has accompanied a rise in public atheist activism and a rapid growth in the number of nonbeliever organizations across the United States (e.g., *Secular Student Alliance*, 2010). A number of reasons have been suggested for the proliferation of

these groups, from the organizing potential of the internet and the perceived threat of continuous religious challenges to the separation of church and state to the popular writings of religious critics and major historical events such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which are often invoked by nonbelievers as an example of how dangerous religious belief can be (Smith and Cimino, 2012).

Researchers have examined topics from anti-atheist prejudice and stigma (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hart-

mann, 2006; Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer, and Nielsen, 2012; Hammer, Cragun, Hwang, and Smith, 2012), collective and individual atheist identity formation (Smith, 2013a; Smith, 2013b), and atheist origins (Norenzayan and Gervais, 2013), to demographics and trends (Zuckerman, 2007; Cragun et al. 2012), nonreligious parenting (Manning, 2009), and atheist psychological profiles (Beit-Hallahmi, 2007). Despite the growing body of research on nonbelievers, much remains to be examined. The focus of this study concerned the preferences and attitudes of (non)affiliated nonbelievers regarding nonbeliever organizations and organized atheist activism. While most research has endeavored to examine individual nonbelievers (e.g., Smith, 2010), there has been very little research that focuses on nonbeliever organizations in America. This is not surprising, given the sometimes transient, informal, or embattled nature of small nonbeliever groups (Demerath and Thiessen, 1966; Demerath, 1969) and the lack of visibility of nonbelievers in the American public in general (Gervais, 2011). To the extent that researchers have examined nonbeliever organizations, they have looked at the role of group processes in social and collective identity formation (Smith, 2013b); their organizational dilemmas and precariousness (Demerath and Thiessen, 1966; Demerath, 1969); member participation, meaning-making and development of an atheist identity in organizations (Ritchey, 2009), and the strategies employed by groups to further their secular agendas and create cohesion and identity (Cimino and Smith, 2007).

The number of groups for and by nonbelievers in America has grown over time (e.g., *Secular Student Alliance*, 2010; Farley, 2013). Historically, such groups have sustained internal conflict and conflict with other groups, both in the U.K. and in the United States (Budd, 1977; Cragun and Fazzino, 2014). LeDrew (2012) and Cimino and Smith (2011) also describe contention among nonbelievers and their groups since the inception of “New Atheism” in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, pointing to differences between those who favor a highly confrontational approach (most popularly referred to as “New Atheists”) and those nonbelievers who seek, at most, accommodation with religious groups and individuals so that they might cooperate on social and political issues that concern both parties, or, at least, peaceful coexistence. While these two positions are not necessarily mutually exclusive<sup>1</sup>, they can be identified as separate strategies or approaches endorsed by different individuals (Kettell,

2013).

Schulzke (2013) describes New Atheism as “a loosely defined movement that...is not a clearly stated ideology and...lacks clear leadership as a social movement. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify points of agreement that many or most New Atheists share, as well as their disagreements with other variants of atheism” (780). These New Atheists choose to vocally challenge theism’s influence on social life, science, and politics. This approach sets them apart from previous forms of atheism in terms of how public their critiques are and how unwilling they are to compromise or coexist with religion and its prominent influence on public life (Csaszar, 2010; Kettell, 2013). Notably, for Schulzke, the New Atheists are differentiated from historical atheists (what we might call “Old Atheists”) and modern atheists who do not identify as New Atheists by a greater emphasis on political instead of theological opposition to religion (the New Atheists advance “a form of political liberalism that coheres to core liberal doctrines,” Schulzke, 2013, 779) and by their confidence in science, particularly the natural sciences (cf. Cragun, 2014).

According to Nabors (2009), even before the rise of New Atheism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a shift had already occurred in the strategies of extant nonbeliever groups. This shift was characterized by an increased focus on argumentation and association with science, accompanied by less emphasis on building coalitions with liberal religious allies and legal proceedings to challenge the separation of church and state. The advent of New Atheism seems to have brought challenges to the separation of church and state back to the fore. There remains some interest in coalition building with liberal religious allies, though this seems to be pursued primarily by those nonbelievers who do not gather under the banner of New Atheism (cf. Epstein, 2009).

Participants in the various nonbeliever groups do not all self-identify as New Atheists, but it is likely that they share many common goals for the collective movement. However, as is the case with many social movements, members also likely differ in their opinions as to the best approaches to achieve these goals. For instance, some members may espouse direct and public confrontation with religious groups, activities, and ideas. For them, only this approach will achieve the goal of eradicating religion, which they perceive as harmful. While it may not be true of all New Athe-

ists, many of the most vocal New Atheist authors do seem to suggest in their writings that their aim is the eventual demise of religion (Stenger, 2007; Dawkins, 2006). Other members of the nonbeliever movement may, instead of wanting to eradicate religion, prefer to minimize its sociocultural, moral, and political influence but otherwise leave it intact and consider it useful for those who feel they want or need religion. Some prior research has found that this more moderate approach to religion exists within the broader nonbeliever movement (Kettell, 2014). These individuals tend to criticize the New Atheist approach for being an “anti-position” that subordinates “the affirmation of ethical values, humanistic virtues, and democratic principles” (Cimino and Smith, 2011, 35). Some members of the nonbeliever movement, who are not New Atheists, could be said to desire a public arena that is shared between the religious and nonreligious. Their approach is characterized more by tolerance, accommodation, coexistence, and a greater focus on the positive as opposed to negative constitutive attributes of nontheism (i.e. building a nontheism or “humanism” in and of itself, rather than defining it in contrast to or as a reaction to theism). Both New Atheists and the more moderate “Old Atheists” appear to share the goal of the separation of church and state, but there is conflict over how to achieve this end, as well as conflict over whether it is important to improve the image or reputation of nonbelievers (Kettell, 2013; Cimino and Smith, 2011).

That there are historical and modern divisions between various nonbeliever groups and viewpoints on the proper approaches, strategies, and goals of the atheist and secular movement has been documented (Budd, 1977; Cragun and Fazzino, 2014; Alexander, 2014; Kettell, 2013; LeDrew 2013). However, no research to date has asked a large sample of nonbeliever movement members about their attitudes regarding movement goals and how those goals should be pursued. Because of this, we set out to examine certain issues that might be perceived as the arenas of conflict—the “fractures” that exist among American nonbelievers—as opposed to their agreements. It is “atheism looking in”, not “atheism facing out”, where we are more interested in what secularists, humanists, atheists, freethinkers, and nonbelievers think about the broader nonbeliever movement and its aims (looking in) than in their perspective of how they are perceived by believers (facing out). While atheism is often framed as a reactionary category (i.e., defined

against theism; Hyman, 2010), part of understanding atheism and nonbelief consists of assessing how atheists differ with respect to their opinions on what purposes or functions their groups should fulfill. Even in a case where preferences for group functions and goals are similar or homogenous across groups of nonbelievers, there might be disagreement over the best strategies to pursue these goals. In the current study, we turned our attention to three areas that illuminate nonbelievers’ attitudes and preferences regarding nonbeliever organizations and the nonbeliever movement in general.

First, we asked nonbelievers about their preferences for the goals, activities, and functions of nonbeliever groups. A variety of groups exist, but they do not all fulfill the same functions or have the same goals, and not all of these functions or goals necessarily reference religion. An assessment of preferences for desired goals gives us a barometer to compare what nonbeliever groups are currently doing against what American nonbelievers want them to do. We do not assume these are necessarily the same, given that most American nonbelievers are not members of any nonbeliever groups. In their mission statements, some of these groups are explicit about challenging religion and/or a theistic vision of the world, science, and politics (e.g. Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science; American Atheists), while others opt for stating support for science, reasoning, critical thinking or inquiry, democracy, and secular values (e.g. Secular Coalition For America; American Humanist Association), while explicitly stating that they don’t wish to eliminate religion (e.g. Center For Inquiry). A variety of functions emerge across a range of groups. Across this range, a variety of stances of hostility towards religion are displayed both explicitly and implicitly, from conciliatory to virulent. Some of the other functions performed by these groups, such as celebrant officiating, charitable activities/social services, and social justice organizing, might be understood as stand-ins or substitutions for the functions normally served by religious organizations and institutions.

Second, we ask group members and former members why they think non-affiliated nonbelievers do not join nonbeliever groups, and we compare this to the actual reasons given by these “secular nonaffiliates”. If there is an issue which might turn some nonbelievers away from joining groups, then this question could reveal the factors that prevent the movement from growing.

In this sense, then, we might see the impact of certain strategies and aspects of organized nonbelief in America that may alienate a broader base of support for the movement.

Third, we examine a number of issues relating to approaches to religion and religious people. According to Kettell (2013, 66), “another fault line between nonreligious sub-groups concerns the zero tolerance approach taken by the New Atheists towards religious beliefs. This is considered by many within the broader nonreligious community to be divisive, polarizing, and ultimately counterproductive.” The extent to which atheists and nonbelievers in general should adopt a confrontational as opposed to a more tolerant or accommodating approach to religion acts as another arbiter over the correct or desirable goals of the movement and the best strategies to pursue them. In assessing where our respondents fall along a spectrum of how religion should be approached, we have loosely envisioned Campbell’s (1971) conceptualization of eliminationists (“Eliminationism is the belief that religion has proved to be erroneous and harmful and thus needs to be abolished”, 345) and substitutionists (“Substitutionists...are more concerned with building a movement which can effectively displace religion in all its major functions and thus they favour a less centralised structure capable of meeting the needs of its members”, 345). However, we prefer the term “accommodationism” over substitutionism and emphasize the aspects of a position that seek to coexist or accommodate in certain ways with the religious, rather than replace it. Our accommodationists are not necessarily Campbell’s substitutionists, although some of them may be, but we have not assessed the extent to which non-eliminationists wish to have a “substitute” for religion. Nevertheless, our data open a window into these preferences by addressing a broad range of potential group functions. Lastly, the atheist movement has also sustained problems with “diversity issues” (cf. Kettell, 2013, 67) involving racism, sexism and social justice issues, so we included a question meant to assess the (un)willingness of respondents to include in their communities what may be certain unpopular social or political opinions.

Given that nonbelieving group members (“secular affiliates”) and nonbelieving non-members (“secular nonaffiliates”) may hold different preferences regarding the goals, activities, and functions of nonbeliever groups, we sought to sample from both groups. Be-

cause the majority of nonbelievers are secular nonaffiliates, there is a risk of those secular affiliates who are visible and vocal becoming the public identity for all nonbelievers. This is important not just for image’s sake, but also for gaining an accurate understanding of how the attitudes, activities, and preferences of unaffiliated nonbelievers play a role in shaping the religious and secular fabric of America, outside of the organizational influence of national and regional efforts. To draw an analogy to believers and religion: the focus of scholars of religion on the influence, position, and authority of religious bodies, elites, and institutions can eclipse the “people in the pews” (especially with reference to those who are “unchurched”, who are in this case the religious analogs to secular nonaffiliates) and whatever role their attitudes and actions may have on the larger American cultural and political scene. For this reason, it is important to include secular nonaffiliates and to differentiate their views, if possible, from those of the secular affiliates.

## Method

### Participants and procedures

A recruitment email was sent to over 100 American atheist, secular, and freethought organizations that were located on the Internet and in various directories on, or maintained by, these groups, after attaining IRB approval of the study. The nature of the study was identified along with a request that the hyperlink to the online survey be provided to their group members. Those who accessed the survey were first presented with the informed consent page, which specified criteria for who was eligible to participate (i.e., those who have resided in the U.S. at least five years or who are a U.S. citizen; 18 years of age or older). Data were collected from January 11th, 2014, to February 9th, 2014. A total of 2,527 respondents started the survey, with 2,006 completing it. Participants were not compensated for their participation, though we offered to send a copy of the completed study to them if they so elected. After coding and cleaning the data, a total nonrandom sample of 1,939 cases remained, all of which had complete responses to all questions. All data reported in results here are based on these 1,939 cases, except where noted. Despite a nonrandom sample, respondents from every U.S. state were represented, from a low of three in Hawaii to a high of 149 respondents from Texas. Thirty-two respondents answered that they did not reside in the United States, but these responses were kept under the as-



sumption that these were U.S. citizens living abroad. Table 1 shows age, race, and gender for all respondents across group membership levels.

**Table 1:** Age, gender, and race of all respondents by group membership levels

	Secular Non- affiliates	Former Members	One Group	Many Groups	All
<b>Age</b>					
Mean	36.02	35.82	38.98	43.62	38.82
Median	33	31	36	43	36
Mode	24	26	21	27	21
Range	18-82	18-86	18-85	18-88	18-88
<b>Gender</b>					
Male	485 (62.2%)	136 (61.3%)	207 (58.1%)	357 (61.4%)	1,188 (61.1%)
Female	292 (37.4%)	85 (38.3%)	148 (41.6%)	220 (37.9%)	745 (38.4%)
<b>Race</b>					
Non- white	69 (8.8%)	15 (6.8%)	19 (5.3%)	32 (5.5%)	135 (7.0%)
White	711 (91.2%)	207 (93.2%)	337 (94.7%)	549 (94.5%)	1,804 (93.0%)

## Measures

The online survey consisted of 15 items and required 10 minutes or less to complete. The first question (see Table 2) asked, “There are a variety of nonbelief labels by which individuals identify. Which of the following terms, if any, do you identify with? Multiple selections are allowed.” Because there may be meaningful differences in the answers of those identifying with some labels and not others, a total of 11 labels were offered and participants could choose as many as applied, with a 12<sup>th</sup> response option of “Other”.

The second question asked, “Do you consider yourself to be a member, whether formal or informal, of any local, state, or national secular organization? This would include groups for humanists, freethinkers, agnostics, atheists, skeptics, and nonbelievers in general.” The four response options were “Yes, I am a member of several different groups” ( $n=581$ , 30%; we will use the label “multiple groups”, or MGs, for the purposes of this paper), “Yes, I am a member of one group” ( $n=356$ , 18.4%; “one group”, or OGs), “I have been a member of a group/groups before but am not right now” ( $n=222$ , 11.4%; “former members”, or FMs), and “No, I have never been a member of such groups” ( $n=780$ , 40.2%; “secular nonaffiliates”, or SNAs). Those categorized as “multiple groups” or “one group” are collectively re-

ferred to as “secular affiliates”, or SAs, in this paper. The third question (see Table 3), asked of all respondents was, “What do you personally think the goals or aims or functions of secular, freethought, or atheist groups should be?”, followed by the listing of 11 response options and a 12<sup>th</sup> option of “Other (Please list below)”. The fourth question (see Table 4), asked only to SAs and FMs, was “Some nonbelievers are not members of any secular, freethought, or atheist organizations. What do you think are their main reasons for not joining or being a member of such groups? Multiple selections are allowed.” A second version of the fourth question (also Table 4), asked only to SNAs, was, “As someone who considers themselves to be a nonbeliever but not a member of any secular, freethought, or atheist organizations, what are your main reasons for not joining or being a member of such groups?”

The fifth question (see Table 5) asked “Which of the following statements do you agree with the most?”, followed by the response options indicative of a respondent’s (un)willingness to attack religion openly. The sixth question (see Table 6) was worded as follows: “Some nonbelievers argue that religion should be eradicated and that it is a mistake to seek religious allies who may share a goal of secularism; others believe that secularism should be a primary goal and are perfectly content to work alongside religious secularists when it may be beneficial to do so. Should nonbelievers work toward the total eradication of religious belief, or is it sufficient to stop those who would impose their religiously-based morality on the rest of their fellow citizens while working together with religious secularists?” The seventh question (see Table 7) asked, “Some nonbelievers think that tactics such as mockery and ridicule of religious people and their beliefs should be avoided. Others say that such tactics have their rightful place, and should not be avoided. Do ridicule and mockery have any place in how nonbelievers respond to or interact with religious people and religious belief?”

The eighth question (see Table 8) asked, “Some nonbelievers are interested in purging their community of ideas they find unacceptable (e.g. political views or social opinions); others believe that there is strength in diversity and that their community is big enough to include those holding what may be unpopular views. How tolerant should nonbelievers be of diverse ideas within their community and those who hold them?” The ninth question (see Table 9) asked, “Many non

**Table 2:** *Identity labels by group membership levels*

Label	Secular Nonaffiliates (n=780)	Former Members (n=222)	One Group (n=356)	Many Groups (n=581)	All (N=1,939)
Skeptic	356 (45.6%)	134 (60.4%)	162 (45.5%)	350 (60.2%)	1,002 (51.7%)
Nonbeliever	354 (45.4%)	115 (51.8%)	172 (48.3%)	326 (56.1%)	967 (49.9%)
Agnostic	236 (30.3%)	58 (26.1%)	85 (23.9%)	155 (26.7%)	534 (27.5%)
Spiritual But Not Religious	79 (10.1%)	22 (9.9%)	17 (4.8%)	27 (4.6%)	145 (7.5%)
Atheist	612 (78.5%)	185 (83.3%)	299 (84.0%)	523 (90.0%)	1,619 (83.5%)
Anti-Theist	146 (18.7%)	42 (18.9%)	78 (21.9%)	189 (32.5%)	455 (23.5%)
Secular	402 (51.5%)	140 (63.1%)	194 (54.5%)	396 (68.2%)	1,132 (58.4%)
Humanist	401 (51.4%)	149 (67.1%)	202 (56.7%)	423 (72.8%)	1,175 (60.6%)
Non-Theist	150 (19.2%)	50 (22.5%)	79 (22.2%)	200 (34.4%)	479 (24.7%)
Freethinker	295 (37.8%)	89 (40.1%)	164 (46.1%)	358 (61.6%)	906 (46.7%)
Rationalist	243 (31.2%)	66 (29.7%)	107 (30.1%)	233 (40.1%)	649 (33.5%)
Other	33 (4.2%)	21 (9.5%)	20 (5.6%)	46 (7.9%)	120 (6.2%)

**Note:** Response options were mutually inclusive.

**Table 3:** *Preferences for secular, atheist, and freethought Group Goals, Activities, and Functions (GAFs) by group membership*

GAF	Secular Nonaffiliates (n=780)	Former Members (n=222)	One Group (n=356)	Many Groups (n=581)	All (N=1,939)
Charity	570 (73.1%) <sup>a</sup>	171 (77.0%) <sup>a</sup>	268 (75.3%) <sup>a</sup>	500 (86.1%) <sup>b</sup>	1509 (77.8%)
SJ Activism	541 (69.4%) <sup>a</sup>	151 (68.0%) <sup>a</sup>	237 (66.6%) <sup>a</sup>	461 (79.3%) <sup>b</sup>	1390 (71.7%)
Socialize	451 (57.8%) <sup>a</sup>	162 (73.0%) <sup>b</sup>	276 (77.5%) <sup>b</sup>	489 (84.2%) <sup>c</sup>	1378 (71.1%)
Politicking	506 (64.9%) <sup>ab</sup>	159 (71.6%) <sup>b</sup>	217 (61.0%) <sup>a</sup>	488 (84.0%) <sup>c</sup>	1370 (70.7%)
Intell Discussion	409 (52.4%) <sup>a</sup>	151 (68.0%) <sup>b</sup>	254 (71.3%) <sup>b</sup>	487 (83.8%) <sup>c</sup>	1301 (67.1%)
Litigate	453 (58.1%) <sup>ab</sup>	144 (64.9%) <sup>b</sup>	193 (54.2%) <sup>a</sup>	459 (79.0%) <sup>c</sup>	1249 (64.4%)
Officiate	324 (41.5%) <sup>a</sup>	98 (44.1%) <sup>a</sup>	165 (46.3%) <sup>a</sup>	330 (56.8%) <sup>b</sup>	917 (47.3%)
Moral Education	341 (43.7%) <sup>a</sup>	92 (41.4%) <sup>a*</sup>	140 (39.3%) <sup>a</sup>	293 (50.4%) <sup>b*</sup>	866 (44.7%)
Proselytize	132 (16.9%) <sup>a</sup>	39 (17.6%) <sup>a</sup>	71 (19.9%) <sup>a</sup>	187 (32.2%) <sup>b</sup>	429 (22.1%)
Other	58 (7.4%)	21 (9.5%)	33 (9.3%)	75 (12.9%)	188 (9.7%)

**Note:** Response options were mutually inclusive. Percentages within rows that do not share superscripts are significantly different at  $p < .01$  or lower, with the exception of “moral education” ( $p=.02$ ) between MGs and FM, denoted by (\*). For all,  $df = 3$ ,  $N = 1,939$ . All response options are listed below, along with chi-square and Cramer’s  $\Phi$  for each omnibus test comparing 2 (Selected or Not Selected) by 4 (Group Membership Levels). Intell Discussion = “I think such groups should hold regular meetings for discussing topics related to critical thinking, rationalism, religion, science, philosophy, and other intellectual topics” ( $\chi^2 = 152.53$ ;  $\Phi = .28$ ). Moral Education = “I think such groups should develop and teach programs of moral education and positive values and ethics, or I think such groups should serve as a platform to improve people morally” ( $\chi^2 = 13.13$ ;  $\Phi = .08$ ). Politicking = “I think such groups should lobby Congress and lawmakers for secular causes, and, in general, be involved in promoting political views, with the goal of advancing secular views and causes via political processes; such groups should be involved in politics” ( $\chi^2 = 78$ ;  $\Phi = .20$ ). Litigate = “I think such groups should litigate and be legal advocates on behalf of secular individuals and causes; such groups should be involved in legal cases” ( $\chi^2 = 83.78$ ;  $\Phi = .20$ ). Socialize = “I think such groups should offer regular social events, recreational outings, and opportunities to socialize and build a sense of community among their members” ( $\chi^2 = 122.66$ ;  $\Phi = .25$ ). Officiate = “I think such groups should provide officials who can conduct life cycle ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, and births” ( $\chi^2 = 32.43$ ;  $\Phi = .12$ ). Proselytize = “I think such groups should use their influence to deliberately convince others to adopt secular or nontheistic views” ( $\chi^2 = 50.04$ ;  $\Phi = .16$ ). Social Justice Activism = “I think such groups should be explicitly involved in social justice efforts to combat racism, sexism, economic inequality, hate crimes, and to support civil rights, equal opportunity, and social equality” ( $\chi^2 = 24.93$ ;  $\Phi = .11$ ). Charity = “I think such groups should be involved in humanitarian activities and charitable contributions” ( $\chi^2 = 34.42$ ;  $\Phi = .13$ ).

believers see science and religion as being compatible. Others do not necessarily agree that science and religion are truly compatible. What is the best response on the question of whether there is com-

mon ground between religious believers and non-believers on the science and religion question?” We also included an additional question (see Table 10) to assess social network density of other nonbe-

lievers by asking, “How many people do you know personally who consider themselves to be some form of nonbeliever but who are not members of a secular, atheist, or freethought group?” Here our primary concern was not the social networks of all nonbelievers, but rather the extent to which secular nonaffiliates maintained ties to other nonbelievers, despite not being affiliated. Response options were listed as: “None”, “One”, “Two to Three”, “Four to Five”, “Six to Ten”, and “More than Ten”.

## Results

**Table 1** reports age, gender<sup>2</sup>, and race across group membership levels. Sixty-one percent of respondents were male, while 93% of respondents were white. The mean age was 38.8, with a median age of 36. Levene’s test for homogeneity of variance revealed that group variances on age were not equal (Levene’s  $W=14.6$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p<.001$ ). There was a significant difference between groups on age as determined by one-way ANOVA,  $F(3, N=1,939) = 31.47$ ,  $p<.001$ .) A Bonferroni post-hoc test revealed that MGs ( $M=43.62$ ;  $SD=16.16$ ;  $p<.001$ ) were significantly older than the other three groups. OGs ( $M=38.98$ ;  $SD=16.60$ ) were also significantly older than SNAs ( $M=36.02$ ;  $SD=13.64$ ;  $p=.01$ ). Chi square testing further revealed that gender and group membership levels were not significantly related.

**Table 2** reports identity labels across group membership. “Atheist” was the most frequently selected identity label across all membership levels, followed by “secular” and “humanist”. A minority of respondents (7.5%) selected the “Spiritual but not religious label”, although SNAs and FMGs selected this option twice as much as OGs and MGs. SNAs only out-selected the other three groups on “Spiritual but not religious” and “agnostic”. Six identity labels were selected by less than 50% of the overall sample: agnostic; spiritual but not religious; anti-theist; non-theist; freethinker; and rationalist. Whereas roughly a quarter of the entire sample selected the anti-theist option, the percentage of MGs who identified as anti-theists (32.5%) is almost twice that of those FMGs and SNAs who identified as anti-theists. Lastly, MGs largely over-selected labels as compared against the overall sample, whereas SNAs under-selected labels as compared against the overall sample.

**Table 3** covers preferences for the goals, activities, and

functions of groups. Because each GAF was collected as its own variable (mutually inclusive; selected or not selected), Bonferroni adjustments in pairwise comparisons were not employed in subsequent pairwise comparisons for 2 (Selected or Not Selected) by 2 (Group Membership x or y) analyses<sup>3</sup>.

SNAs differ from both FMGs and OGs mainly in their lower preference for intellectual discussion and socializing opportunities (although the difference between OGs and SNAs appears to be greater than that difference between FMGs and SNAs on these same preferences). Otherwise they seem largely similar. With the exception of Politicking and Litigating, where FMGs evince a stronger preference (albeit these are still small differences; Litigate,  $\chi^2(1, n=578) = 6.8$ ,  $p=.009$ ,  $\Phi=.10$ ; Politick,  $\chi^2(1, n=578) = 6.3$ ,  $p=.01$ ,  $\Phi=.01$ ), FMGs and OGs are highly similar in their preferences.

MGs stand out from the other three groups, with higher percentages in every category. They differ from OGs primarily in their greater desire for litigation ( $\chi^2(1, n=937) = 64.08$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\Phi=.26$ ), but differ least from OGs in terms of preference for socializing. MGs are primarily differentiated from both FMGs and SNAs by their greater preference for intellectual discussion, but least differ from each group in terms of all three groups’ preferences for moral education, albeit moral education is the second least preferred GAF overall. The relatively higher percentages for the MGs across all GAFs comport with their status as members of many groups. The same might be said for SNAs concerning their relatively lower percentages across all GAFs. Importantly, but perhaps not surprisingly, where we find differences between groups, the greatest differences, in terms of both frequency and magnitude, are consistently sustained between MGs and SNAs, particularly in their preferences for intellectual discussion ( $\chi^2(1, n=1,361) = 145.81$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\Phi=.32$ ; considered a medium effect size at 1 degree of freedom).

Notable patterns in **Table 3** include the lower preference across all groups for seeing their groups engage in proselytizing (where the MGs are distinct from the other three groups, albeit still relatively low), and the relatively high preference across all groups for engaging in social justice activism and charitable activities. In fact, for all groups except OGs, charitable activities is ranked the as the top goal. Thematic analysis of qualitative “Other” responses reveals three dominant themes: Many groups/many purposes (niche) approach



**Table 4:** *Why secular nonaffiliates do not join groups, compared to perceptions of secular affiliates and former group members*

Reasons Given	Secular Affiliates/ Former Members (n=1,159)	Secular Nonaffiliates (n=780)
Low Priority	646 (55.7%)	340 (43.6%)
Not Local	631 (54.4%)	254 (32.6%)
Nonbelief Not Big Part Of Self-Identity	898 (77.5%)	240 (30.8%)
Too Much Like Atheist Church	575 (49.6%)	192 (25.0%)
Too Focused On Attacking Religion	640 (55.2%)	193 (24.7%)
Intellectual Independence	274 (23.6%)	139 (17.8%)
Other	159 (13.7%)	115 (14.7%)
Silly, Pointless, Contradictory	499 (43.1%)	95 (12.2%)
Too Ideological, Dogmatic, Close-Minded	342 (29.5%)	92 (11.8%)
Stigma	753 (65.0%)	82 (10.5%)
Misguided Or Wrong Goals	260 (22.4%)	46 (5.9%)
No Interest In Discussion Types	401 (34.6%)	40 (5.1%)

**Note:** Multiple selections were allowed. Similar questions were asked of both groups; response options listed here were the same for both groups, with the exception of the proper pronoun replacement (“I” for Secular Nonaffiliates instead of “they” for Secular Affiliates and Former Members). Nonbelief not Big Part of Self Identity=“They don’t see nonbelief as a primary part of their self-identity; being a nonbeliever is just not a big deal to them”. Silly, Pointless, Contradictory=“They think organized forms of nonbelief are silly, pointless, or self-contradictory”. Misguided or Wrong Goals=“They think such groups have misguided or wrong goals”. Too Focused on Attacking Religion=“They think nonbelieving groups are too focused on religion, i.e. attacking and criticizing it”. Intellectual Independence=“They value their intellectual independence so much that they are not willing to be told by others what to believe or not believe”. Too Ideological, Dogmatic, Close-Minded=“They think such groups are too ideological, dogmatic, or closed-minded about their views”. Too Much Like An Atheist Church=“They think organized nonbelief mimics organized religion too much, i.e. ‘atheist church’”. Stigma=“They don’t want to risk the social stigma that might come with being a public nonbeliever”. Low Priority=“They would join but they simply have better or more important things to do with their, i.e. it is low priority”. Not Local=“They would join but such groups are not locally or immediately available to them”. No Interest in Discussion Types=“They have no interest in having philosophical, metaphysical, or intellectual conversations about science, religion, etc.”.

**Table 5:** *Willingness to attack or not attack religion by group membership*

Response	Secular Nonaffiliates (n=780)	Former Members (n=222)	One Group (n=356)	Many Groups (n=581)	All (N=1,939)
Attack	38 (4.9%)	10 (4.5%)	16 (4.5%)	38 (6.5%)	102 (5.2%)
Depends	481 (61.7%)	150 (67.6%)	234 (65.7%)	434 (74.7%)	1,299 (66.9%)
Refrain	57 (7.3%)	15 (6.8%)	17 (4.8%)	25 (4.3%)	114 (5.8%)
Focus Within	150 (19.2%)	34 (15.3%)	64 (18%)	56 (9.6%)	304 (15.6%)
None Of The Above	54 (6.9%)	13 (5.9%)	25 (7.0%)	28 (4.8%)	120 (6.1%)

**Note:**  $\chi^2 (12, N = 1,939) = 41.3, p < .001, \Phi = .08$ . Attack = “Nonbelieving groups should always or usually openly criticize and attack religion”. Refrain = “Nonbelieving groups should always or usually refrain from openly attacking religion”. Depends = “Nonbelieving groups should not even worry about openly attacking religion, but should instead focus their attentions and efforts within their own groups”. Focus Within = “What nonbelieving groups should do depends on context and various other factors; sometimes they should openly attack religion, and sometimes they should refrain from openly attacking religion; it depends on various considerations”.

**Table 6:** *Willingness to eradicate or accommodate to religion by group membership*

Response	Secular Nonaffiliates (n=780)	Former Members (n=222)	One Group (n=356)	Many Groups (n=581)	All (N=1,939)
Eradicate	176 (22.6%)	44 (19.8%)	87 (24.4%)	169 (29.1%)	476 (24.5%)
Accommodate	494 (63.3%)	144 (64.9%)	205 (57.6%)	326 (56.1%)	1,169 (60.3%)
Ignore	28 (3.6%)	10 (4.5%)	22 (6.2%)	24 (4.1%)	84 (4.3%)
Unsure/Undecided	82 (10.5%)	24 (10.8%)	42 (11.8%)	62 (10.7%)	210 (10.8%)

**Note:** Eradicate = “If possible, religion should be eradicated entirely”. Accommodate = “Secularists, nontheists, and atheists should seek accommodation with religious people to achieve common goals; beyond that, they should leave religious people alone and not seek to eradicate religion”. Ignore = “Secularists, nontheists, and atheists should neither work with religious people on common causes nor should they seek to eradicate religion in its various forms”



(39); support other nonbelievers/act as support groups/provide community (26); and promote education, critical thinking, and science (24). Secondary themes to emerge consisted of supporting separation of church and state (16), along with promoting awareness of and a positive image for atheism (16).

Table 4 reports on why secular nonaffiliates do not join groups, and the guesses given by MGs, OGs, and FMs as to why SNAs do not join groups. Most SAs and FMs thought that SNAs did not join groups because being a nonbeliever was not a salient part of their self-identity, i.e. “not a big deal”, and because of the social stigma associated with being an open nonbeliever. The dominant reasons given by SNAs as to why they do not join atheist, secular, or freethought groups were (a) because it is either a low priority, or (b) because being a nonbeliever simply isn’t important to them, that is, it is not a salient part of their identity. Notably, roughly a third of SNAs said that they would join groups but that such groups are not locally available to them. SAs and FMs were particularly sensitive to social stigma as a reason many SNAs didn’t join groups, although SNAs’ selection of stigma as a reason did not support this; SAs and FMs were more accurate in identifying low priority as one of the main reasons given by SNAs. Weighting percentages for each group, by dividing raw cell numbers by total “Yes” selections for each column, yields differences in percentage of endorsement in each category between the two groups. Highest percentage differences existed for “stigma” (-8%), which SAs/FMs endorsed more so than SNAs; “low priority” (8%), endorsed more heavily by SNAs; “not local” (-4%), endorsed more so by SAs/FMs than SNAs; and “no interest in discussion types” (4%), endorsed more so by SNAs than affiliates/FMs. A series of binomial tests comparing the two sets of proportions on each item revealed that only the proportions for “low priority” and “other” were not statistically significantly different from one another. Dominant themes that emerged from qualitative “Other” responses across all groups included “Not enough time” (21); “introverted, shy, not social, or not interested in socializing” (14); and “groups not available/unaware of groups nearby” (13).

Table 5 reveals that a majority of all groups seem to favor a balanced or considered approach to when and whether religion should be criticized and attacked. SNAs were the most likely of the four groups to say either that nonbelieving groups should always or usually

refrain from openly attacking religion or that groups should turn their attentions and efforts towards their own groups instead of focusing an attack on religion. Pairwise comparisons, employing Bonferroni corrections ( $p=.008$ ), revealed that MGs and OGs differed,  $\chi^2 (4, n=937) = 18.08; p<.001, \Phi=.14$ . MGs were more likely than OGs to opt for attack. MGs also differed from SNAs,  $\chi^2 (4, n=1,361) = 37.74, p<.001, \Phi=.16$ . SNAs were more likely than MGs to select the “Refrain” option and the “Focus Within” option.

Omnibus chi-square testing did not reveal any significant associations between group membership and willingness to eradicate or accommodate to religion ( $\chi^2 (9, N=1,939) = 16.49, p<.057, \Phi=.05$ ). Table 6 reveals the major finding that a majority of respondents in each group suggested that, aside from working together with the religious on common goals, religious people should be left alone and no attempt should be made to eradicate religion. However, about twice as many respondents were in favor of eradicating religion altogether than were in favor of simply ignoring it altogether.

Much as with the above question concerning attacking or not attacking religion openly, a majority of respondents in Table 7 seemed to favor a balanced or considered approach, suggesting that some extent of mockery and ridicule would be acceptable, depending on various considerations. Otherwise, many more respondents were in favor of avoiding the use of mockery and ridicule as opposed to endorsing its use as a valid tactic or approach. Subsequent pairwise comparisons, employing Bonferroni adjusted alpha level corrections ( $p=.008$ ) revealed that MGs differed from OGs,  $\chi^2 (3, n=937) = 18.59, p<.001, \Phi=.14$ . MGs were more likely to have selected both the “Don’t Avoid” and “Depends” options. MGs differed from FMs,  $\chi^2 (3, n=803) = 13.93, p=.003, \Phi=.13$ , in that FMs were more likely than MGs to select the “Avoid” option, whereas MGs were more likely than FMs to select the “Depends” option. MGs differed from SNAs,  $\chi^2 (3, n=1,361) = 38.33, p<.001, \Phi=.16$ . SNAs were more likely to select “Avoid” than MGs.

Table 8 reports that a majority of respondents opted to accept a diversity of opinions within their communities, presumably even unpopular political views or social opinions. Subsequent pairwise comparisons employing Bonferroni adjusted alpha level corrections ( $p=.008$ ) revealed that the only difference between

**Table 7:** *Willingness to use or not use mockery/ridicule of religion by group membership*

Response	Secular Nonaffiliates (n=780)	Former Members (n=222)	One Group (n=356)	Many Groups (n=581)	All (N=1,939)
Avoid	290 (37.2%)	70 (31.5%)	123 (34.6%)	128 (22.0%)	611 (31.5%)
Depends	428 (54.9%)	130 (58.6%)	206 (57.9%)	401 (69.0%)	1165 (60.1%)
Don't Avoid	47 (6.0%)	14 (6.3%)	21 (5.9%)	45 (7.7%)	127 (6.5%)
Unsure	15 (1.9%)	8 (3.6%)	6 (1.7%)	7 (1.2%)	36 (1.9%)

**Note:**  $\chi^2 (9, N = 1,939) = 44.09, p < .001, \Phi = .08$ . Avoid = “Mockery and ridicule of religious people and religious beliefs should be avoided; they are counterproductive or make nonbelievers look bad”. Don’t Avoid = “Mockery and ridicule of religious people and religious beliefs should be encouraged or used; it is the treatment that religious beliefs deserve, and to avoid using them is to give religious people and religious beliefs a free pass that they don’t deserve”. Depends = “Some degree of mockery and ridicule are acceptable and/or recommendable, but it just depends on various different things”

**Table 8:** *Willingness to accept or not accept diverse social and political opinions in secular/atheist communities by group membership*

Response	Secular Nonaffiliates (n=780)	Former Members (n=222)	One Group (n=356)	Many Groups (n=581)	All (N=1,939)
Not Compatible	139 (17.8%)	31 (14.0%)	74 (20.8%)	141 (24.3%)	385 (19.9%)
Accept Diversity	559 (71.7%)	165 (74.3%)	234 (65.7%)	385 (66.3%)	1,343 (69.3%)
Not Sure	82 (10.5%)	26 (11.7%)	48 (13.5%)	55 (9.5%)	211 (10.9%)

**Note:**  $\chi^2 (6, N = 1,939) = 17.75, p = .007, \Phi = .06$ . Not Compatible = “Certain views and ideas are not compatible with a secular or atheistic view of the world, and should therefore be excluded from having a place in atheist and secular communities”. Accept Diversity = “Atheist and secular communities should strive to accept diversity in opinions, as this could only serve to strengthen such communities”.

**Table 9:** *Views on compatibility of science and religion by group membership*

Response	Secular Nonaffiliates (n=780)	Former Members (n=222)	One Group (n=356)	Many Groups (n=581)	All (N=1,939)
Incompatible	380 (48.7%)	109 (49.1%)	202 (56.7%)	349 (60.1%)	1,040 (53.6%)
Pretend Compatible	199 (25.5%)	56 (25.2%)	93 (26.1%)	148 (25.5%)	496 (25.6%)
Compatible	201 (25.8%)	57 (25.7%)	61 (17.1%)	84 (14.5%)	403 (20.8%)

**Note:**  $\chi^2 (6, N = 1,939) = 34.89, p < .001, \Phi = .09$ . Incompatible = “Science and religion are obviously incompatible; faith is irrational, and endorsing the unity of science and religion only enables delusion”. Pretend Compatible = “Science and religion are not truly compatible but we should pretend that this is the case so as not to lose public support for science; it is valuable for nonbelievers to work alongside religious believers to pursue shared goals, and an individual’s religious belief is irrelevant unless it leads them to distort or misrepresent science”. Compatible = “Science and religion may answer different questions but they are compatible in certain ways; failing to see this is either unimaginative or intolerant”

**Table 10:** *Number of personal nonbelieving affiliates known by group membership*

Response	Secular Nonaffiliates (n=780)	Former Members (n=222)	One Group (n=356)	Many Groups (n=581)	All (N=1,939)
None	26 (3.3%)	4 (1.8%)	17 (4.8%)	18 (3.1%)	65 (3.4%)
One	34 (4.4%)	2 (0.9%)	9 (2.5%)	25 (4.3%)	70 (3.6%)
Two To Three	138 (17.7%)	40 (18.0%)	97 (27.2%)	117 (20.1%)	392 (20.2%)
Four To Five	142 (18.2%)	43 (19.4%)	74 (20.8%)	110 (18.9%)	369 (19.0%)
Six To Ten	151 (19.4%)	54 (24.3%)	54 (15.2%)	113 (19.4%)	372 (19.2%)
More Than Ten	288 (36.9%)	79 (35.6%)	104 (29.2%)	198 (34.1%)	669 (34.5%)

groups was between MGs and FM,  $\chi^2 (2, n=803) = 10.28, p=.006, \Phi=.11$ . FM were more likely to endorse diversity than MGs.

In Table 9, most respondents agreed that science and religion are not compatible. MGs and OGs were just

as likely as FM and SNAs to take the middle way and suggest that, while the two are not truly compatible, it should not matter so long as one’s beliefs did not lead them to distort or misrepresent science. However, MGs and OGs were less likely than FM and SNAs to say that religion and science are com-

patible. Subsequent pairwise comparisons employing Bonferroni adjusted alpha level corrections ( $p=.008$ ) revealed that MGs differed from FM,  $\chi^2 (2, n=803) = 14.9, p<.001, \Phi=.13$ . MGs were more likely to select “Incompatible”, whereas FMs were more likely to select “Compatible”. MGs differed from SNAs,  $\chi^2 (2, n=1,361) = 28.35, p<.001, \Phi=.14$ . SNAs were more likely than MGs to select “Compatible”, while MGs were more likely than SNAs to select “Incompatible”. OGs differed from SNAs,  $\chi^2 (2, n=1,136) = 11.04, p=.004, \Phi=.09$ . SNAs were more likely than OGs to select “Compatible”, while OGs were more likely than SNAs to select “Incompatible”.

In Table 10, we find that SNAs, more than any other group, are likely to know more than ten people who are some form of nonbeliever but who are not members of groups. In fact, a sizable percentage of each group claims to know more than ten such individuals, whereas very low percentages result for None and One only. Most groups, with the exception of the OGs, show ascending values from None to the maximum. Kruskal-Wallis testing revealed that there were significant differences between groups,  $\chi^2 (3, N=1,939) = 15.6, p<.001, \eta^2=.35$ . Subsequent Mann-Whitney U testing revealed that OGs differed from FMs ( $U=32840; z=-3.52; p<.001; r=.14$ ), and that OGs also differed from SNAs ( $U=121859; z=-.342; p<.001; r=.10$ ).

## Discussion

### Theoretical connections and applications

LeDrew (2014) and Cimino and Smith (2007; 2011) have highlighted the differences between secular humanists and New Atheists with regard to organizational goals, movement strategies, and general attitudes and views on religion. Presumably, those who call themselves secular humanists are more likely to espouse accommodationist perspectives, whereas the New Atheists are eliminationists. However, it must be said that this dichotomy oversimplifies the perspectives of many individual nonbelievers. The majority of our respondents, across the entire spectrum, opt to *circumstantially* engage in and refrain from attacking or ridiculing religion; it is not a matter of fixity or rigidity, but rather context and circumstance (whether such attitudes reflect courtesy, social etiquette, or tactical planning remains a question for future research). This, in conjunction with low preferences for group proselytization and a majority preference for

accommodation when directly asked, allows us to see that the accommodationist perspective overall is more highly preferred than elimination, such that most of our respondents could be seen to fall in the middle to low ranges of a scale of hostility towards religion (from a sample where 83% of respondents identify as “atheist”, 61% identify as “humanist”, and only 23% identify as “anti-theist”). The relatively low preference for groups to proselytize may reflect a concern about how such activities would damage efforts to improve or create a positive atheist identity; it is also possible that respondents think this is an activity better left to individuals to conduct rather than groups (much the same may be said for “moral education”, given its relatively marginal preference status).

However, this, along with the finding that two-thirds of our respondents opt for diversity and inclusion in their communities when it comes to a variety of political views and social opinions, highlights the notion that the existence of both types of approaches are valued or endorsed to some extent, a finding that supports Kettell’s (2013) observations. The responses here illustrate that diversity and tolerance more aptly characterize the mindset of a majority of individuals across the nonbeliever spectrum when it comes to group participation and membership. There may be divisions between types of nonbelievers over accommodationist and eliminationist approaches, but the movement is broad enough that it contains both approaches, even if some acknowledge one as detrimental for the public acceptance of atheists while the other is seen as useful to the overall accomplishment of movement goals (cf. Kettell, 2013, 67). But, the finding of such preferences for accommodation (or, perhaps, lack of abundant and overt hostility) raises the question of how the vocal minority of New Atheists might have shaped public perceptions of the rest of nonbelievers who would not consider themselves to be New Atheists, or even anti-theistic. Csaszar (2010) argues that the only “new” thing about New Atheists is that they have greater access than previous atheists, via the Internet and new media, to wider audiences of the public, and that the modern social climate affords such outspokenness as never before. Cheyne and Britton (2010) further offer that atheism is often construed as necessarily anti-theistic. Our findings offer a tentative corrective to potential public misperceptions concerning levels of anti-theism and hostility towards religion on the part of atheists and other nonbelievers as the participants in our sample did



not exhibit primarily eliminationist perspectives.

LeDrew (2013) further mentions the relationship between activist participation in atheist groups and atheist identities, noting that the stories atheists tell about themselves which define their atheism may be derived from the narratives that have been generated in the collective discourse within the atheist movement (cf. also Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp, 2013). This is illustrated to some extent when our secular nonaffiliates (SNAs) suggested that being a nonbeliever is either not that important to them, or that participating in groups is not high in their list of priorities. However, future research should concern itself with how the views and activities of SNAs affect or influence the nature and direction of the overall atheist movement, given that they likely outnumber those who formally identify themselves with groups. Future research might also do well to look at the social and intellectual needs of SNAs, as these appear to be distinctly lower than the other three groups. Are these needs being met elsewhere, or do they simply not have much need of such things? To be fair, it might be equally justifiable to ask about the greater desires of the other groups for socializing and intellectual discussion; do they lack other resources to meet such needs, or is their need for such things simply greater, for whatever reason?

Similar to LeDrew, Smith (2013, 458) has pointed out that “even the identities of atheists who are not participants in groups or otherwise in no sense involved in active atheism can be influenced by the broader discourse and activities of the active atheist community.” This point is perhaps lent even more credence by the apparent social network density of SNAs, suggesting that these individuals are largely not isolated from other nonbelievers even though they do not hold memberships in organized groups. This means that the ideas and activities and general influence of groups of which they are not members still has a channel by which to impact them through affiliated peers, or through those who are like themselves but may engage in various forms of participation without formal or active membership. While the number of known others says nothing about the quality or strength of such ties, it dispels the notion of “village atheist” and the refrain that is often heard from atheist respondents and individuals concerning their social isolation from other nonbelievers (Zuckerman, 2009). There are various ways in which SNAs may,

and probably do, informally participate in an atheist identity, participation that is simply not connected to formal groups. Because we now understand the role of the Internet in the growth of modern American atheism (Cimino and Smith, 2014), it becomes plausible to suggest that many nonbelievers can adequately and substantially participate in an atheist identity without having formal or organizational ties; in fact, for some, this may be preferable. This raises the question of how the nonbeliever self-identities of SNAs and SAs may differ as a result, in addition to the question of how the politics, ethics, and epistemologies of these two groups, and their understandings of the purpose of a nonbeliever social movement, may be similar or different. In the final analysis, it may be useful to distinguish between several dimensions: extent of eliminationism vs. accommodationism, strength or salience of atheist identity, affiliation or non-affiliation, and levels and types of activism and involvement. From this it should be clear that there are individuals who are technically nonbelievers but who are not particularly interested in religion/atheism, their identity as an atheist, being a member of nonbelieving groups, and who are not involved in any types of movement activism, whether online or offline, informally or formally.

Insofar as our sample refers to self-described atheists, as opposed to nonbelievers who do not use this descriptor, our findings tie into Frost's (2012) qualitative study of the use of identity politics within the atheist movement, which found that some atheists do not identify with the movement strategies which are propagated by national groups and leaders, such as mobilizing atheists to claim public identities, challenging church and state separation violations, and criticizing religion's influence on public and private life. Even more pointedly, most respondents in her study did not identify atheism as a salient identity and did not participate in atheist activism to a significant degree, if at all; respondents seemed to be operating off of different “scripts” from those which are promoted by atheist opinion leaders and national organizations, and many respondents felt that trying to organize atheism was either harmful to the public perception of atheists, or meaningless. The findings from our current study would seem to corroborate Frost's findings with regard to a lack of salient atheist identity on the part of some nonbelievers and a lack of high prioritization for organized activism and “doing” one's atheism, though the point must not be overlooked that such respondents are not devoid of their

own opinions regarding atheist activism, movement strategies, and atheist identity in general.

### Limitations

First, our survey was based on a nonrandom sample of American nonbelievers, and thus cannot be generalized to the larger populations of secular affiliates or American nonbelievers in general. Second, we received many lines of feedback from respondents on the wording of our questions and response options. Regarding our sixth question on eradicating, accommodating, or ignoring religion (see Table 6), some respondents suggested in feedback that a fourth option should have been available, that of working together with religious people on common causes while also seeking to eradicate religion. This might account for a number of Unsure/Undecided responses here. This is also important because an appreciation of having both “prongs” of the approach simultaneously in play has been demonstrated by some research (Kettell, 2013).

Regarding our seventh question on mockery and ridicule of religion (see Table 7), some respondents suggested that response options should have distinguished between religious people and religious ideas, being that a distinction can be made between the two in terms of willingness to mock or ridicule. This would seem to be a blend of accommodationist and eliminationist perspectives, where some respondents would be willing to ridicule or mock beliefs but would wish to show respect to the people who hold such beliefs. Regarding our eighth question (see Table 8) on willingness to accept various social and political opinions within secular, freethought, and atheist communities, it is possible that the wording of this question and its responses could have steered respondents towards the pro tolerance view, or away from the inference of being “intolerant”, even though we would not have been able to specify types of social and political opinions to our respondents without leading them.

Regarding our ninth question on the compatibility of religion and science, at least one respondent objected to the use of the word “pretend” in the second response option; the exact feedback was expressed in these words: “Your ‘middle road’ answer to the question implies that I would have to ‘pretend’ or lie about the compatibility of science and religion in order to work with religious people, but that isn’t the case. We can have a strong disagreement about compatibility and still work together on something we agree is cor-

rect: Science. I chose the option that best suits my view on science as a collaborative enterprise, but I would NOT mislead believers on my position or personal views.” We grant that the word “pretend” has a negative connotation, whereas accommodation has a more positive connotation, and that this might have skewed the acceptability of this response option. Nevertheless, it remains the case that this option represents the accommodationist position.

Third, on the question of known number of nonbelieving affiliates who are also not members of groups (see Table 10), it is possible that respondents were considering those individuals that they did not *personally* know, despite the use of the word “personally” in the question. This would have meant counting online affiliates instead of those known through face-to-face interaction. This also introduces the potential problem that the SNAs who would have received the invitation to participate in the study were those who would have already had some connection to nonbeliever groups. This may have inflated the nonbeliever social network density results as we probably oversampled people who have some connection to other secular affiliates and groups. In this sense, there is a *fifth* group of nonbelievers who would not have been tapped into by this study, those who are both nonbelievers and non-affiliated but who retain absolutely no ties to or awareness of nonbelieving others and groups, and who were unlikely to see an announcement about the study through the social media channels and/or websites that mentioned the study. It is possible that there were some of this fifth group in the sample, as they may have seen announcements about the study on social media; however, we have no way of knowing if that is the case. In retrospect, it seems unlikely that such individuals would have even endeavored to complete a survey like ours.

Fourth, future research may seek to discover the circumstances and contexts under which nonbelievers would or would not be willing to use criticism or ridicule. As previously stated, we cannot determine here if such considerations involve social etiquette, the defense or advancement of the reputation of nonbelief, or some other reason. Future research might also investigate the reasons why former members are no longer members of groups. Furthermore, whereas here we have asked SNAs why they do not join groups, it might be prudent to ask secular affiliates why they themselves join groups, and what benefits they per-

ceive to be derived from such participation and affiliation. It is important to maintain a distinction between what an individual feels local, state, and national groups should be doing, and the specific reasons an individual has for her or his own participation. Lastly, as participant feedback regarding the wording of questions suggested, future research should conduct qualitative interviews with nonbelievers who fall into each category to advance our understanding of the nuances of this topic.

## Conclusion

This study was concerned with a social movement and the organizations and activities through which it is composed and carried out. Our focus was not on how social movement theory is best applied to modern American nonbelief, but we think it is important for more scholars to take that approach (cf. Kettell, 2014, which brings to bear Resource Mobilization Theory on nonbeliever groups and their activities in America). If atheists, secular humanists, and other nonbelievers in America have been increasingly forming groups to achieve goals such as reducing social stigma against nonbelievers, defending the public sphere and the political realm against the encroachment of religious hegemony, promoting science and critical or rational modes of thinking, providing alternatives to mainstream religion, and in general seeking to combat the influence of religion, then there is no reason that social movement theory cannot be applied to organized atheism in an effort to achieve a greater understanding of atheists and their groups.

The number of nonbelieving groups in America has grown over time, just as the number of individual nonbelievers has grown. While such a movement might be viewed for its solidarity, historically and contemporaneously there have been divisions and conflicts between such groups over courses of action or goals, and between individuals on how religious people and religion in general should best be approached; in particular, there is a tension between efforts to change public perceptions of atheists while simultaneously engaging in efforts to combat religion in a variety of ways. We asked American nonbelievers what they felt their groups should pursue in terms of functions and goals, and we asked nonbelievers who weren't members of groups about their reasons for not being a part of these groups. Based on our results, we might suggest that the movement strategies em-

ployed by national and regional secular groups have not been entirely effective in galvanizing a sense of import and collective identity to the broad swathe of nonbelieving Americans. These groups also have not been entirely effective in reaching these individuals. It remains true that nonbelieving individuals have their own opinions about what nonbeliever groups should be doing, despite not being members, and how religious people and religion should be handled, despite not being as immersed, at least as formally, as group members. It also remains true that a number of them say that they would join such groups if these groups were locally available to them, suggesting that individuals stay connected to atheist organizations (or at least associates in such groups) in some manner online, though physical attendance isn't a feasible or viable option for them. Ultimately, our findings suggest that there is a sizable proportion of nonbelievers who are not involved in the organized movement of nonbelief. For many such individuals, the reason why they are not involved is because their nonbelief simply doesn't matter. Mobilizing nonbelievers for whom nonbelief is not salient will likely prove difficult, but it may also be the case that such nonbelievers represent the ultimate aim of the nonbelief movement – living one's life comfortably without religious belief.

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## Endnote

- [1] As one of our respondents in this study would point out, one can desire to simultaneously work with religious individuals and organizations on common goals while also seeking to diminish the influence of religion, or even to eliminate it altogether.
- [2] Six respondents elected “Other” for gender and are not reported for gender in Table 1.
- [3] According to Lowry (2012) and Gravetter and Wallnau (2008), with 3 degrees of freedom, a Cramer’s  $\Phi$  of .06 or above represents a small effect size; .17 or above represents a medium effect size; and .29 or above represents a large effect size, meaning that Cramer’s  $\Phi$  for Intellectual Discussion (.28) and Socialize (.25), as the largest effect sizes for GAFs, approach the threshold of large effect sizes.