

On the Receiving End: Discrimination toward the Non-Religious in the United States

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ABSTRACT *The present study examines perceived discrimination faced by religious ‘nones’. After distinguishing between atheists, agnostics, and ‘nones’ who are deists or theists, we use nationally representative data from the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) to study the contexts in which these various types of religious ‘nones’ have reported experiencing discrimination. The strongest predictor of such discrimination was not theological atheism or agnosticism but self-identifying as an atheist or agnostic when asked what one’s religion is. Context-specific predictors of discrimination are age, region of the country, rural versus urban location, parents’ religious identifications, educational attainment, ethnicity and race. Results are consistent with the view that people who hold more pronounced views are more likely to report discrimination.*

Introduction

Atheism predates Christianity and is probably as old as belief in a god or gods (Bremmer 11). Prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behavior toward atheists are likely to be just as old, given that the term ‘atheist’ originated as a label for one’s enemies (ibid 12). A number of previous studies have found negative attitudes towards atheists (D’Andrea and Sprenger 157; Ehrlich and Van Tubergen 125; Harper 549; Jenks 786; Newport 1; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 3). Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann (230) cogently illustrated the general ethos in the US toward atheists: Americans, in general, report more antipathy toward atheists than toward religious groups, such as Muslims, conservative Christians, and Jews; toward racial and ethnic groups, such as recent immigrants, Hispanics, Asian Americans or African Americans; or toward homosexuals. Despite the disdain directed toward atheists, there are between 3.6 and 5.2 million people who are theological atheists in the US today (Kosmin et al. 11; Lugo 26). Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann explain the antipathy toward atheists as a ‘boundary-marking’ issue: American civic culture puts religion at the heart of the ‘good society’. Thus atheists run counter to what Americans generally think of as culturally acceptable, because they do not, as a group, endorse religion. As a result, they are one of the most despised people in the US today. Of note, however, is that Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann assert that “attitudes toward atheists tell us more about American society and culture than about atheists themselves” (230).

The studies described above focus on attitudes toward atheists. Atheists, however, are a sub-set of another, larger group: the non-religious or 'religious nones' (Vernon 226)—individuals who do not identify with a religion.¹ Atheism and agnosticism describe positions toward deity, not religious affiliations (Cliteur 2). One can, of course, be a theological atheist or agnostic but still identify with a religion, as Sherkat (455) and Kosmin et al. (11) find. Similarly, many religious nones do believe in a god or some form of higher power (ibid; Sherkat 455).

This raises the question of how to distinguish between different uses of the terms. When asked what their religion is, some individuals respond by saying 'atheist', 'agnostic', 'humanist' or 'secular' (Kosmin and Keysar, *Religion* 22; Lugo 26). Given current, widely used definitions of both religion (Lundskow 15) and atheism and agnosticism (Cliteur 2; Smith 15), describing one's religion as 'atheist', 'agnostic', 'humanist' or 'secular' does not actually make sense, as these are either positions toward deity (atheist and agnostic), personal philosophies that may or may not include the supernatural (humanism) or the very essence of non-religion (secular). Despite the fact that it is not always clear what these self-assigned labels mean, researchers typically assign individuals who identify their religion as 'atheist', 'agnostic', 'humanist' or 'secular' to the category of 'religious nones' (Kosmin and Keysar, *Religion* 22; Lugo 26).

In this article we examine discrimination toward religious nones. However, we find that the sub-set of individuals who report their religion as 'atheist', 'agnostic', 'humanist' or 'secular' are substantively different from individuals who report their religion as 'none' and therefore examine them as an important sub-set of religious nones. Specifically, we address three questions: (1) what percentage of the non-religious in America report discrimination? (2) In what contexts (e.g. family, workplace) does this discrimination take place? (3) What other factors predict whether a non-religious individual will experience discrimination in various contexts?

Literature Review

While it is clear that there is antipathy toward atheists, it is less clear whether there is a general sense of dislike toward all religious nones. Neither Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann (230) nor the other representative US survey, the 2002 Religion and Public Life Survey, asked specifically about attitudes toward religious nones or agnostics, only about atheists. Thus it is not clear whether people hold negative attitudes toward religious nones generally. Additionally, no previous research has asked a representative sample of religious nones in the US whether or not they have experienced discrimination (we address the second *lacuna*).

There are a number of anecdotal and non-systematic illustrations of discrimination reported by religious nones, agnostics, and atheists (Dawkins; Goodstein 1; Heiner 17; Hunsberger 135; Koproske 1; Pollitt; Reisberg A43; Zorn). For instance, Army Specialist Jeremy Hall sued the military in 2008 after his life was threatened by fellow soldiers when he revealed his atheism (Kaye). Downey (41) has documented acts of discrimination against the non-religious since 1995 through the Anti-Discrimination Support Network, a committee of

the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia. She has received reports of hundreds of instances of discrimination against the non-religious, ranging from shunning to job dismissals, death threats, and physical violence. Downey also notes that many more instances go unreported because individuals fear more severe repercussions. While there are numerous anecdotal reports of such discrimination, there is no systematic assessment of discrimination as perceived by the non-religious.

Because the primary question of interest in this article is not attitudes toward the non-religious but the discrimination perceived by the non-religious, the most logical literature to explore is research which examines perceived discrimination by other minority groups. One such comparison would be with other religious minorities that are known to have experienced discrimination, including the Jews (Rosenfield 440; Shapiro 16), Mormons (Messner), Sikhs (The Pluralism Project 3), Muslims (Bloul 20; El Hamel 305; Montgomery 1600), Catholics (Hirschman 1230), and others (Davis 218). Members of virtually every religious group that has ever been a minority have experienced discrimination (Hewstone, Islam and Judd 789). However, we have been unable to find systematically collected data on how widespread perceived discrimination is against any of these religious minorities (e.g. 20% report discrimination in any given year). Additionally, many religious minorities are not directly comparable to the non-religious, as the latter are not outwardly identifiable in everyday life, unlike, say, Hasidic Jews or Sikhs. Thus the lack of concrete data on discrimination against religious minorities and the fact that many religious minorities are more like racial/ethnic (W. J. Wilson 20) and gender (Black and Rothman 130; Casper, McLanahan and Garfinkel 601) minorities in that they are outwardly identifiable make them less than ideal for comparison with the non-religious.

A better comparison group for the non-religious may be lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (LGBs) (Herek and Glunt 240; Meyer 692), as the characteristic that invites prejudicial attitudes and subsequent discrimination is not necessarily visible: both homosexuals/bisexuals and the non-religious have to be 'out' or 'outed' for others to know about the characteristic that leads to discrimination against them (Corrigan and Matthews 245; Silverman), although there is recent research (Rule, Ambady and Hallett 1246) that suggests otherwise. LGBs are more likely than heterosexuals to have experienced discrimination, although how much more varies according to the context of discrimination (Mays and Cochran 1871). Mays and Cochran report that more than half of homosexuals have experienced some form of prejudice or discrimination in their life-times, compared to just over one third of heterosexuals. LGBs earn less than their heterosexual colleagues and are at least twice as likely to experience discrimination than heterosexuals in work contexts (Meyer 692). The discrimination experienced by LGBs is also more severe than that experienced by heterosexuals. A study of LGB adults in Sacramento, California, reports high rates of victimization (including sexual assault, physical assault, robbery, and property crime) related to their sexual orientation (Herek, Gillis and Cogan 948). LGB youth report comparatively high levels of harassment, which they attribute to their sexual orientation and which leads to poorer physical and mental health (Meyer 692).

Discrimination against minorities also varies according to context, which is not surprising as there are some contexts over which individuals have

greater control. For instance, a young gay male born into a family that identifies with a religion that views homosexuality as a sin is likely to experience more discrimination based on his sexual identity in the family context than a male born into a less prejudicial family, as he has little control over who his parents are while he is growing up. In contrast, he may have the opportunity to attend an institution of higher education—environments that may be more liberal and open-minded—and thus experience less discrimination in the school context (R. Wilson 2). Given that both atheists and LGBs are stigmatized minorities, it is reasonable to hypothesize that atheists also experience varying levels of discrimination in different contexts. Further, if attitudes toward the non-religious are similar to those toward atheists, the non-religious may also experience varied levels of discrimination in different contexts.

Additionally, the predictors of discrimination are likely to vary according to context. For instance, the age of a non-religious individual may affect the odds of discrimination in the family context, as young people have less control over their family situation than older people, who form their own families and have the option to cease contact with prejudiced parents if needed (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook 438). However, age may have the opposite effect in the work context, as older people are more likely to experience discrimination in that context (Gee, Pavalko and Long 286). Likewise, discrimination in general social contexts (e.g. night clubs, sports) might vary as a function of the region of the country in which the non-religious individual resides (e.g. American South versus New England) (Ellison and Musick 395), but may not vary within the family context (Heiner 16; Sherkat 455; Stump 220). Thus, not only is the amount of discrimination which the non-religious experience likely to vary by context, it is also likely that other contextual factors will influence the experience of discrimination within each context.

Another predictor that is important to consider when thinking about antipathy toward the non-religious is the varied ways people dis-identify from religion. When individuals are asked whether or not they identify with a religion, reporting 'none' does not necessarily suggest personal opposition to religion but rather a sense of dissatisfaction with the array of religions in the religious marketplace (Moore 12). It also says little about belief in god or about religious beliefs generally. However, reporting one's religious identification as 'atheist' or 'agnostic' is usually taken to suggest something beyond dissatisfaction with the available religions: in the minds of those who hear such labels, they suggest a general lack of morality and danger to the public order (Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann 230). This represents a more pronounced out-group status than one would have as merely an irreligious person or a disbeliever. In the minds of those meeting the 'atheist' or 'agnostic', they are not just meeting someone who is 'not religious', but someone who doubts the existence of god. This does not mean that individuals who identify themselves this way more strongly identify with irreligion than people who simply say 'none'. Yet self-identification as something beyond 'none' may heighten attention to one's out-group status among those who hear about one's irreligious identity. Therefore, one might reasonably expect more discriminatory treatment to accompany a more pronounced out-group status and its implicit threat to the *status quo* (Levin et al. 558). In fact, research has found that those who more strongly identify with their minority status are more likely to be victims of prejudice, as they threaten the

values and hegemony of those in power (Kaiser and Pratt-Hyatt 440). Identifying with the more pronounced out-group status of 'atheist' may, to those in the dominant group, represent a stronger identification with the minority identity of non-religiousness, leading to greater discrimination.

Also of note in discussing discrimination against the non-religious is the growing body of research that focuses on the role of religion on prejudice. For example, religious fundamentalism scores predict homophobic attitudes in both Canadian and Ghanaian samples (Hunsberger, Owusu and Duck 190). The importance of religion is highlighted by findings which indicate that, when prejudice is proscribed (e.g. against race) by religion, highly religious people are less prejudiced. However, when religious beliefs do not proscribe prejudice (e.g. against sexual orientation), highly religious people are more prejudiced (Duck and Hunsberger 176). Many religions do not proscribe prejudice against the non-religious and may, in fact, openly advocate such prejudice (Harris 127; Hitchens 78). An early emphasis on religion in one's family appears to serve as a template which produces an 'us-them' framework for addressing religious differences (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 25), which may in turn contribute to the use of religious beliefs as a marker for indicating whether or not individuals are part of one's in-group.

Religiosity variables correlate differently with group membership and moral judgment dimensions of out-groups that violate moral norms. Notable for the present study is that religious people's attitudes toward homosexuals (but not toward aboriginals, women or abortion) were predicted both by their membership in an out-group and their morality (Mavor and Gallois 370). Very intrinsically religious people react negatively toward actions that violate their values, but not toward the individuals who perform that action (Mak and Tsang 388). This raises the interesting question of how religious individuals might react toward people whose beliefs represent a violation of religion itself.

The non-religious will fall in the out-group of almost 80% of Americans, which suggests that many Americans will not look favorably upon them. Self-identifying as an atheist or agnostic adds a second out-group element to the attitude equation; rather than just not being religious, self-identified atheists and agnostics also indicate that they do not believe in a god. As Hewstone, Islam and Judd (790) illustrate, doubling the number of out-groups a person belongs to substantially increases the prejudicial attitudes against such an individual. Thus, the double out-group identification of atheists and agnostics may help explain why atheists and agnostics are so disliked in the US today.

In summary, general attitudes of Americans toward homosexuals and atheists tend to be negative. The non-religious are like LGB individuals in that the characteristic that makes them minorities and disliked by a large segment of the population is generally not visible. Individuals in both groups can attempt to 'pass' in everyday life by simply avoiding topics that might raise awareness of their minority status (Garfinkel 113). However, when the minority status of these individuals is known, it increases their exposure to potential discrimination. There is evidence to suggest that both groups experience discrimination, although the degree to which they experience discrimination is likely to vary according to context. It is also important to note that the stress of being closeted or discriminated against is likely to be more intense for LGB individuals than for the non-religious.² Additionally, there is no systematically

compiled evidence of the percentage of the discrimination which the non-religious experience. Finally, it is likely that individuals who identify with multiple out-groups and/or have a more strongly pronounced out-group status will be more likely to experience discrimination as a result of the greater perceived threat to the *status quo*. This suggests the following hypotheses:

- hypothesis 1: the percentage of non-religious individuals who experience discrimination will vary according to context (e.g. work, family, social life, etc.).
- hypothesis 2: individuals who identify as atheist or agnostic will report more discrimination than individuals who identify as neither.

Data and Methods

Data for this project come from the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) (Kosmin and Keysar, *American* 4). ARIS 2008 was carried out during February–November 2008 and included answers from 54,461 adult respondents who were questioned in English or Spanish (for additional information on the ARIS methodology, see Kosmin and Keysar, *American* 4). Included in the 2008 ARIS were five ‘silos’, or sub-sets, of respondents: Catholics (n=1,023), Evangelicals (n=1,008), those who self-identify as having ‘no religion’ (n=1,106)—which includes individuals who reported to be ‘atheist’, ‘agnostic’ or ‘humanist’ (n=116)—Protestants (n=1,079), and a random national sample (n=1,015). The silo of interest here is those who self-identify as non-religious.³

Not all the participants in each silo were asked the same questions. However, all participants in the 2008 ARIS were asked basic demographic questions, including: sex (male, female), educational attainment (less than high school, high school, some college, college, graduate school, technical school), race (white non-Hispanic, black non-Hispanic, white Hispanic, black Hispanic, Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, unspecified, other race), marital status (single, never married, cohabiting, married, separated, widowed, divorced), household income (recoded into less than \$50,000 and more than \$50,000),⁴ political affiliation (other, Republican, Democrat, Independent), and age (coded as actual age and re-coded into the following groups: 18–29, 30–49, 50–69, 70+). Additionally, regional and rural/urban data are included in the dataset, based on the location of the respondent. Region is based on census divisions (New England, Mid Atlantic, East North Central, West North Central, South Atlantic, East South Central, West South Central, Mountain, Pacific).⁵ Rural/urban is based on a metro/non-metro distinction (Center City, Center City County, Suburban, Non-Center City, Non-Metro). Finally, all individuals in ARIS were asked about their religious identity. Those included in the ‘no religion’ silo included individuals who self-identified as ‘none’, ‘no religion’, ‘atheist’ or ‘agnostic’.⁶ Table 1 presents descriptives of each of these variables for the non-religious and national random sample groups.

Individuals in the non-religious silo were asked several additional questions. They were asked to describe their theological belief regarding the existence of God: “There is no such thing” (atheist), “There is no way to know” (hard agnostic), “I’m not sure” (soft agnostic), “There is a higher power but no

personal god" (deist), "There is definitely a personal god" (theist).⁷ They were also asked about the religious identification of their parents when they were growing up (both identified with the same religion; they identified with different religions; one identified with a religion, but the other did not; neither identified with a religion) and the age at which they left religion (if they were raised in a non-religious home, this was marked as missing).

The dependent variables in this study are a series of questions that were asked exclusively of the non-religious: "In the past 5 years, have you personally experienced discrimination because of your lack of religious identification or affiliation in any of the following situations": in your family; in your workplace; at school or college; in the military; socially; in volunteer organizations or clubs. The religious identifications reported in the random sample of the non-religious are reported in Table 2, together with basic descriptives for the other questions which were asked of the non-religious.

Results

The bi-variate analyses of the descriptives in Table 1 indicate that non-religious individuals are not significantly different from the national random sample in their educational attainment. However, religious nones are significantly younger and more likely to be white, more likely to be male, more likely to be political independents, and substantially less likely to be Republicans. They are also more likely to be single and never married and they make more money than the average American adult. They are also significantly less likely to live in the South Atlantic, East South Central or West South Central states, but more likely to live in New England, the Mid Atlantic or Pacific states.

The descriptive statistics in Table 2 provide additional information about the non-religious. When asked about their religious identification, 4% report 'atheist' and an additional 6% report 'agnostic'. Just under 90% report 'no religion' or 'none'. Self-reported identification, when contrasted with belief in God, provides an intriguing comparison. When one asks about theological beliefs rather than religious identification, the picture of the non-religious changes dramatically. While only 4% report their religious identification as 'atheist', 10% of the non-religious are atheists based upon their theological non-belief in God. Likewise, only 6% of the non-religious report their religious identification as 'agnostic', but 22% are theologically hard agnostics ('There is no way to know') and an additional 20% are theologically soft agnostics ('I'm not sure'). Using theological classification, 51% of the non-religious are atheists and agnostics. Another 25% hold a deistic or New Age understanding of God, while 24% believe in a personal God.

Table 2 includes similar questions for a random sample of the general population. In the general American adult population, 3% are theological atheists; another 10% are theological agnostics and 12% hold deistic or New Age views of God. Just under 70% of Americans believe in a personal God; 6% do not know what they believe or refuse to answer the question (not shown in Table 2).

Also of interest is the disparity between self-reported religious identification and theological classification. In the non-religious silo, of those who reported

Table 1. Crosstab (percentages shown) and chi-square comparisons of non-religious with national random sample.

Education	n	< High School	High School	Some College	College	Graduate School	Technical School	Chi-Square
Non-Religious Random Sample	1104 1006	7.8 7.6	25.9 27.3	23.2 20.5	24.2 26.6	17.4 15.6	1.5 2.4	6.41
Race	n	White	Black	Hispanic	other	Chi-Square		
Non-Religious Random Sample	1088 1003	83.0 81.7	6.5 7.3	3.4 5.9	7.1 5.2	10.57**		
Marital Status	n	Single, Never Married	Cohabiting	Married	Separated	Widowed	Divorced	Chi-Square
Non-Religious Random Sample	1104 1010	22.3 16.8	6.8 4.1	51.2 55.0	1.7 1.7	6.6 11.4	11.4 11.1	30.14***
Household Income	n	<\$50,000	\$50,000+	Chi-Square				
Non-Religious Random Sample	993 868	45.9 52.8	54.1 47.2	8.68**				
Political Affiliation	n	Republican	Democrat	Independent	Other	Chi-Square		
Non-Religious Random Sample	1033 934	12.5 33.1	33.8 32.3	51.5 33.5	2.2 1.2	133.87***		
Sex	n	Male	Female	Chi-Square				
Non-Religious Random Sample	1106 1015	62.9 49.9	37.1 50.1	36.86***				

(continued)

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for questions asked of the non-religious and random national sample.

Self-reported Religious Affiliation	Non-religious Silo (%)	Random National Sample Silo (%)
Atheist	4.1	0.8
Agnostic	6.2	0.6
Humanist	0.2	0.0
No religion/None	89.5	14.6
n	1106	1015
Belief in God		
There is no such thing.	9.6	2.7
There is no way to know	22.0	4.5
I'm not sure	19.5	5.4
There is a higher power but no personal God	24.6	12.2
There is definitely a personal God	24.4	68.9
n	1022	1015
Experienced Discrimination		
Context	All Non-religious (%)	Atheists/Agnostics (%)
Family	9.1	12.9
Workplace	7.0	14.2
School	5.9	13.0
Military	1.8	3.4
Socially	14.4	26.1
Volunteer Organization	5.3	8.7
Total Experienced Discrimination in any Context	21.6	42.9

their religious identification as 'atheist', 56% reported that they do not believe in a God. Of self-identified atheists 30% are theological agnostics, 5% are deists, and 9% are theists. Among self-identified agnostics, almost 60% are theological agnostics, 30% are deists, 3% are atheists, and 5% are theists. In short, even if someone responds to the question "What is your religion, if any?" with 'none', that does not mean that they do not believe in a god, do not think you can know if a god exists or do not know. They may believe in a higher power or God.

Table 2 also includes basic descriptives on the discrimination the non-religious report experiencing as a result of their lack of a religious identification. The percentages that report experiencing discrimination vary significantly⁸ and substantially according to context, supporting hypothesis 1. Only 1.8% of the non-religious report having experienced discrimination in the military (this applies only to those who said it was relevant; a large percentage said this context was 'not applicable' to them). The context in which the largest percentage of people report having experienced discrimination is social: 14.4% report having experienced discriminatory behavior. Individuals can, of course, report experiencing discrimination in multiple contexts. 22% report having experienced discrimination in one or more contexts; only one person reported experiencing discrimination in all six contexts. That means a majority (78.4%) of the non-religious do not report experiencing discrimination as a result of their lack of a religious identification in the last five years, in any of the contexts.

Table 3. Percent experiencing prejudice or discrimination by belief in God and self-reported religious identification.

Belief in God	% Experiencing Discrimination
There is no such thing.	25.0
There is no way to know	27.4
I'm not sure	15.6
There is a higher power but no personal God	23.9
There is definitely a personal God	20.1
Chi-Square	7.553
Self-reported Religious Identification	
Atheist	41.2
Agnostic	44.0
No religion/None	19.1
Chi-Square	25.073***

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

What predicts reported discrimination as a non-religious individual? One possibility is that discrimination is not so much related to being non-religious as it is based on individuals' belief in a god. We test this idea using chi-square; the results are shown in Table 3. The top portion of the table contrasts the different beliefs in God with a dummy code indicating whether or not an individual reported experiencing discrimination in any context over the last five years. Although there is variation in the rate of perceived discrimination by belief in God, the differences are not statistically significant.

The second portion of Table 3 replicates the first, but does so using self-reported religious identification rather than theological classification (belief in God). This was done on the assumption that self-labeling as 'atheist' or 'agnostic' when asked one's religion reflects multiple out-groups and/or a more strongly pronounced out-group status. If that assumption is accurate, comparing the levels of reported discrimination allows us to test whether those who identify with a more strongly pronounced out-group status are more likely to report experiencing discrimination. The numbers in Table 3 support this idea. 41% of those who report their religious identification as 'atheist' and 44% of self-identified agnostics report experiencing discrimination in at least one of the contexts we asked about over the last five years. Only 19% of those who say 'no religion' or 'none' report having experienced discrimination in any context over the last five years. Additional support for the importance of self-identification can be seen in Table 2 where the percentage of atheists/agnostics (combined) who report experiencing discrimination in the six contexts we asked about are listed. Self-identified atheists and agnostics report almost double the discrimination (42.9%), compared to the non-religious generally (21.6%).

Multivariate analyses allow us to hold constant some of the variables that distinguish the non-religious from the general population (although all of the multivariate analyses are conducted on the non-religious silo) in order to

determine whether those demographic differences contribute to reporting discrimination. To do so, we employed logistic regression analyses. Table 4 presents the results of four logistic regressions: one for each of the four contexts in which the non-religious could perceive discrimination due to their not being religious: family, workplace, school, social. There are no models shown for reporting discrimination in the military or in voluntary organizations, as there are no variables that significantly increase the odds of reporting discrimination in either context in our data. The key independent variable in these models for testing hypothesis 2 is the first variable, a dummy code indicating whether or not individuals self-identify as atheist or agnostic.

Model 1 in Table 4 regresses a dummy variable indicating whether or not someone reported experiencing discrimination in the family context on the independent variable and various demographic variables. Only two variables in the model are statistically significant, although the independent variable approaches significance. Relative to having two non-religious parents, having parents with different religions significantly increases the odds of reported discrimination in the family context ($B=1.035$, $p < .05$). There are also significant regional variations. Relative to the South Atlantic states, individuals who live in New England, East North Central, West North Central, and Pacific states are all more likely to report experiencing discrimination. While the relationship between self-identifying as an atheist or agnostic and reporting discrimination in the family context is in the direction of greater discrimination, the relationship is not statistically significant at the generally accepted alpha ($.05 < p < .10$). One item that is noteworthy is the overlap in variance explained between age and marital status. With marital status in the equation, age is not significant, but with it removed (not shown), it nears significance. Bivariate analyses between perceived discrimination in the family context and both age and marital status (not shown) show significant relationships with never married singles and young people, both being more likely to report discrimination in this context.

Model 2 in Table 4 repeats the above analyses but with reported discrimination in the workplace context as the dependent variable. One variable stands out—self-identifying as atheist or agnostic. Self-identified atheists and agnostics are three times as likely to report experiencing discrimination in the workplace as those who identify as ‘nones’ ($p < .001$). There is also some regional variation, with individuals in the East North Central states reporting more perceived discrimination relative to individuals living in South Atlantic states. Removing marital status from the equation (not shown) has a similar effect on age, as it did in the family context, indicating the colinearity between age and marital status.

Model 3 repeats the analysis using reported discrimination in a school or college context as the dependent variable. Two variables stand out as notable. Self-identified atheists and agnostics are 3.4 times as likely ($p < .001$) to report discrimination in this context as self-identified religious nones. The second variable is income: individuals who earn less than US\$50,000 per year are 2.4 times as likely to report experiencing discrimination than individuals who earn more than US\$50,000 per year, in a school or college setting for not being religious ($p < .01$). In separate models (not shown), we included educational attainment, which attenuated the relationship between income and discrimination, suggesting colinearity. We include only income in the model as a result. In an

Table 4. Experiencing discrimination in specific contexts and overall regressed (logistic) on predictor and control variables.

	Model 1-family		Model 2-workplace		Model 3-school		Model 4-socially	
	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
Atheist/Agnostic [^]	0.563	1.756†	1.121	3.069***	1.219	3.385***	0.933	2.541***
Age (continuous)	-0.010	0.990	-0.008	0.992	-0.015	0.986	-0.016	0.984**
Sex [^]	0.042	1.043	-0.191	0.827	-0.114	0.893	-0.104	0.901
Income [^]	0.270	1.309	0.247	1.280	0.863	2.370**	0.059	1.061
Race [^]								
White	-0.962	0.382†	-0.614	0.541	-0.251	0.778	-0.508	0.602
Black	-0.420	0.657	0.595	1.803	-0.053	0.948	0.022	1.022
Other	-0.877	0.416	-0.523	0.593	0.367	1.443	-0.175	0.839
Marital Status [^]								
Single, never married	0.130	1.138	-0.355	0.701	0.545	1.724	0.205	1.228
Single, cohabiting	0.111	1.117	0.290	1.336	0.324	1.382	0.270	1.310
Separated	0.941	2.562	0.908	2.479	1.103	3.013	0.271	1.312
Widowed	-0.146	0.864	-0.788	0.455	-0.885	0.413	-0.893	0.409
Divorced	0.359	1.433	-0.411	0.663	0.234	1.264	0.102	1.107
Parents' Religion [^]								
Both same religion	0.551	1.735						
Different religions	1.009	2.744*						
One relig./one not	0.507	1.660						
Rural/Urban								
Center city	-0.272	0.762	-0.529	0.589	0.392	1.481	0.208	1.231
Center city county	-0.453	0.636	-0.217	0.805	0.160	1.173	-0.158	0.854
Suburban	-0.253	0.777	-0.236	0.790	0.207	1.229	0.013	1.013
Non-center city	-0.137	0.872	0.126	1.135	-0.636	0.529	0.818	2.267†
Census Divisions [^]								
New England	1.183	3.265*	0.269	1.308	-0.890	0.411	0.362	1.436
Mid Atlantic	0.848	2.334	0.513	1.670	-0.815	0.443	-0.188	0.829
East North Central	1.656	5.238***	1.168	3.216**	0.034	1.035	0.748	2.113*
West North Central	1.236	3.440*	-0.143	0.866	-0.837	0.433	-0.455	0.634
East South Central	1.267	3.550†	1.123	3.075†	0.824	2.278	1.488	4.429***
West South Central	1.128	3.088†	0.795	2.215	-0.610	0.543	0.579	1.784
Mountain	0.720	2.055	0.569	1.767	-0.757	0.469	0.613	1.845
Pacific	1.274	3.575**	0.732	2.076	0.063	1.065	0.576	1.780†
Constant	-2.654	0.862***	-2.201	0.111**	-2.768	0.063**	-1.218	0.296*
-2 Log Likelihood		534.39		461.84		375.02		751.73
Cox & Snell R ²		0.040		0.039		0.051		0.063
Nagelkerke R ²		0.085		0.094		0.139		0.111

†p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

[^] Each of the nominal variables includes a comparison group that is reflected in the constant. The variables are coded as follows, with the variable reflected in the constant indicated by italics: atheist/agnostic: 0 = atheist/agnostic/humanist, 1 = *none/no religion*; sex: 0 = female, 1 = male; income: less than \$50,000 = 1, more than *US\$50,000* = 2; race: 1 = white, 2 = black, 3 = other, 4 = *Hispanic*; marital status: 1 = single, never married, 2 = single, cohabiting, 3 = separated, 4 = widowed, 5 = divorced, 6 = *married*; parents' religion: 1 = both same religion, 2 = different religions, 3 = one relig./one not, 4 = *neither religious*; rural/urban: 1 = center city, 2 = center city county, 3 = suburban, 5 = non-center city, 5 = *non-metro*; census divisions: 1 = New England, 2 = Mid Atlantic, 3 = East North Central, 4 = West North Central, 5 = East South Central, 6 = West South Central, 7 = Mountain, 8 = Pacific, 9 = *South Atlantic*.

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additional analysis with marital status removed (not shown), age becomes significant, again illustrating the colinearity between age and marital status.

Model 4 repeats the analysis but with reported discrimination in the social context as the dependent variable. Three variables stand out as significant. Self-identified atheists and agnostics are 2.5 times as likely to report experiencing discrimination socially as self-identified religious nones ($p < .001$). Younger people are significantly more likely to report experiencing discrimination socially than older individuals ($p < .01$). Relative to individuals living in South Atlantic states, individuals living in East South Central and East North Central states are significantly more likely to report experiencing discrimination socially. This is also the only context where rural/urban differences are noteworthy, although the increase in reported discrimination in non-center city areas relative to non-metro areas is not significant.

Discussion

In support of our first hypothesis, we find that the percentage of non-religious individuals who report experiencing discrimination varies according to context. Non-religious people are substantially more likely to report experiencing discrimination in family settings and socially than they are in the workplace, school, the military or voluntary organizations. The non-religious are most likely to report experiencing discrimination socially; roughly one in seven non-religious individuals reported experiencing discrimination in that context over the last five years.

Also supportive of our first hypothesis are the findings in Table 4. The variables that predict perceived discrimination vary according to context. In the family context, the only variables that significantly predicted perceived discrimination were parental religious identification and region. Having parents with two different religions significantly increases the odds of reported discrimination in the family context relative to having two parents who have no religion. This makes intuitive sense, as parental disapproval of a child's non-religious stance is much less likely when both parents are non-religious themselves. This also supports the finding that religiously heterogeneous relationships experience more conflict than religiously homogeneous relationships (Lehrer and Chiswick 400); this appears to include conflict beyond that experienced by the partners themselves.

That identifying as an atheist or agnostic did not substantially increase reported discrimination in the family context is somewhat surprising. However, what this may reflect is another in-group/out-group divide. Family members retain at least one in-group membership with self-identifying atheists and agnostics. Cross-categorization of group memberships—having one in-group and one out-group in common with someone—attenuates prejudice (Hewstone, Islam and Judd 789). Thus, self-identifying atheists and agnostics may report less discrimination in a family context because they retain family membership. Additionally, the closer relationships with family members may allow for greater understanding of what the agnostic/atheist label means, which is less likely in other contexts. As a result, family may be less likely to be affronted by such labels.

Another explanation for the reason why identifying as an atheist or agnostic may not significantly alter reported discrimination in this context could be due to the way our question was worded. Since 'coming out' as an atheist or agnostic often occurs in adolescence (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 100; Fitzgerald 13; Hunsberger 56; Hwang 20), this is a time when one is still living in the family home and more vulnerable to discrimination from one's family of origin, if the family is religious. Just over 90% of the participants in the non-religious silo are over 24 years old. This has two implications. Firstly, older people have the opportunity to form their own families and may have the option to cut off contact with their family of origin. This could reduce the amount of discrimination experienced by these atheist and agnostic individuals in the family context as they age. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, participants were instructed to only recount discrimination experiences that occurred within the past five years of their lives. Therefore, while these atheists and agnostics may have reported experiencing discrimination in the family context when they were younger, living with their parents, and 'came out', for those over 24 years of age it may have been more than five years since they were in such a situation.

In the workplace, self-identifying as an atheist or agnostic significantly increases the likelihood of reporting discrimination relative to those who self-identify as religious nones. This finding is supportive of both hypothesis 1 and 2, as it is those who identify with the more strongly pronounced out-group status who are at greatest risk of experiencing perceived discrimination and it illustrates variation in predictors of discrimination in different contexts. That self-identifying as atheist or agnostic is significant in the workplace is not surprising, as there are many subtle ways to discriminate against people that can be masked using other explanations (e.g. showed up late, called in sick, etc.) (Huang and Kleiner 130). Also, individuals living in East South Central and East North Central states are at increased risk of experiencing discrimination in the workplace context, compared to individuals living in South Atlantic states, which is consistent with at least some other studies on regional differences in religiosity (Ellison and Musick 395; Heiner 16; Sherkat 455; Stump 220).

Also supportive of both hypothesis 1 and 2 is the finding that self-identifying as an atheist or agnostic significantly increases the likelihood of reported discrimination in the school or college context. While it is not uncommon for conservatives to claim a liberal bias on college campuses (R. Wilson), there are a number of studies that suggest that college campuses are not as liberal, inclusive, and/or open-minded as conservatives often suggest (Ancis, Sedlacek and Mohr 182; Ellis 735; Faia 198; Goodman and Mueller 60). Examining the experiences of LGBTs on campuses in the UK, Ellis (735) found that the participants in her research did not consider college campuses 'safe' places, as they still experienced discrimination in that setting. Goodman and Mueller (60) make the same argument for atheists. Our findings support this conclusion: discrimination against atheists and agnostics occurs on college campuses.

That older participants were less likely to report discrimination for their lack of religious identification in the school or college context may be due to individuals' increased ability to control their social networks as they age (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook 438). It is well understood that social networks grow more homogeneous with age. Young individuals in a school or college context have little control over who their instructors and classmates are.

Older individuals are likely to be the instructors, professors or administrators, which means they have chosen to work in this context.

One additional and rather complex finding appears in the school/college context: the significant increase in reported discrimination resulting from lower income. Interpreting this finding is difficult, as it is not clear who is reporting discrimination in this context. There are several possibilities. Firstly, it may be the case that students with a lower SES (socio-economic status) fall lower in the social hierarchy, making it more acceptable to discriminate against them for their non-religion. These may also be non-traditional, more mature students. However, only 8% of the 62 individuals reporting discrimination in this context indicate they are full-time students. Alternatively, this may reflect higher amounts of discrimination against younger faculty and staff who are non-religious, as younger faculty and staff are particularly vulnerable when they first arrive in these settings (48% of the individuals reporting discrimination in this context are employed full-time, 19% are part-time, and 11% are retired). Or it may be the case that this reflects a sub-class of people in this context: individuals with lower incomes could include the janitorial and grounds-keeping staff in schools or colleges. As there is some evidence to suggest that individuals with a lower socio-economic status encounter higher rates of prejudice and discrimination (Halperin, Pedahzur, and Canetti-Nisim 194; Pettigrew et al. 396), it may be that individuals with a lower SES in school and college settings who are non-religious experience more discrimination as a result of whom they are around while in these settings. However, 45% of the individuals reporting discrimination in this context make more than US\$40,000 per year and 15% make more than US\$100,000, which suggests that these individuals may be located in specific disciplines, like law or business, where academic salaries are higher and other faculty tend to be more religious. In short, it is not very clear why there is a significant relationship between income and reported discrimination based on non-religion in school contexts.

Self-identifying as an atheist or agnostic significantly increases the likelihood of reporting discrimination socially, which further supports our hypotheses. Like adolescent LGBs, young religious nones are at higher risk of experiencing discrimination socially as a result of their being non-religious. This may be attributable to younger individuals having less control over the environments in which they socialize as well as less personal power with which to discourage such discrimination. Additionally, this may be an illustration of how homophily changes over the life course (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook 438). As individuals age, the similarity of their friends to themselves increases substantially (*ibid*). Regional variations in reported discrimination are also significant in the social context, with individuals living in East South Central states having the greatest likelihood of reported discrimination.

It is also noteworthy that we found very little perceived discrimination in the military and in voluntary organizations, but substantially higher rates socially and in the family context. Reported discrimination is lowest in contexts where it is possible to file suit against those who discriminate. This seems to suggest that the American public is growing more sensitive to possible legal ramifications for discriminating in specific contexts. As a result, discrimination occurs outside those contexts and in contexts where lawsuits are substantially more difficult

to pursue, like in everyday social interactions or in the family. It may also be the case that individuals are less likely to reveal their religious identities in these contexts.

Additional evidence supporting hypothesis 2 comes from the descriptive statistics in our sample: 21.6% of non-religious individuals report having experienced discrimination in one or more contexts (e.g. family, workplace, school, military, socially or in voluntary organizations) over the last five years, as a result of their non-religiosity. Aggregated, that number hides the fact that certain sub-groups of the non-religious are substantially more likely to report discrimination than are others. Those who report their religious identification as 'atheist' or 'agnostic', who—we argue—identify with a more strongly pronounced out-group status, are significantly more likely to be on the receiving end of discrimination as a result of not being religious than individuals who simply report their religious identification as 'none'. Roughly two out of every five self-identifying atheists and agnostics report having experienced discrimination in one of the six contexts we examined over the last five years and nearly one in four atheists and agnostics reported discrimination socially in the last five years as a result of their non-religion. This supports the findings of both Hewstone, Islam and Judd (789) and Kaiser and Pratt-Hyatt (440) that it is individuals who are very different from and who threaten the legitimized worldview of the majority who are at greatest risk of experiencing discrimination.

One aspect of our findings that we find intriguing has to do with self-identifying as 'atheist' or 'agnostic'. As noted in the introduction, 'atheist' and 'agnostic' are not religious identifications but theological positions toward a divinity. While many of the individuals who self-identify as atheists and agnostics are, in fact, atheists and agnostics in their beliefs toward divinity, many are not. What motivates these people to self-identify this way? The most likely explanation is that these individuals are identifying with a particular sub-group in order to derive fulfillment and self-esteem. This is known as the 'distinctiveness principle', which is postulated to be an innate human drive (Vignoles, Chrysochoou and Breakwell 350). Humans do not want to be too different from everyone else, but they do not want to be the same as everyone else either. This appears to be particularly true in Western cultures that emphasize individualism (*ibid*). Thus, despite the fact that 'atheist' and 'agnostic' are not religions, identifying your 'religion' as such may enhance self-esteem by illustrating one's distinctiveness at the individual level while simultaneously showing allegiance with a deviant group. However, our explanation of this phenomenon warrants further investigation.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although anecdotal accounts of perceived discrimination exist (Downey 41) and qualitative research has documented cases of discrimination (Heiner 17; Hunsberger 135; Tetlock et al. 865), this study provides a systematic, representative sample which documents perceived discrimination due to religious disbelief. Respondents in this study report their perceptions, of course, and it is possible that the actions that they perceived as discriminatory

were minor aggressions based on factors other than the person's religious belief or affiliation. The same criticism of self-reported discrimination, while a legitimate concern, can be leveled at research examining the self-reported discrimination of other minority groups (Mays and Cochran 1871). Although it can be difficult to ascertain the motivation behind discrimination (Sue et al. 283), experimental research may yield insights beyond those available in a survey. For instance, a laboratory study found that, when asked to rank people on a waiting list to receive a kidney, respondents gave significantly lower priority to patients with atheist or agnostic views than to patients who identified themselves as Christian (Furnham, Meader and McClelland 740). Research manipulating such factors may provide additional insights into the motivation behind differential treatment.

Another limitation of our data is that the atheist and agnostic group is relatively small, counting just 116 individuals (out of the total non-religious silo of 1,106). However, this sample of individuals does not differ in any substantive ways from the other 612 atheists and agnostics interviewed in ARIS 2008. Rudimentary statistical comparisons suggest no significant differences in demographics between the two groups.

Our data are also not directly comparable to those of Mays and Cochran (1871) and other researchers on the prevalence of discrimination experienced by LGBs, in that Mays and Cochran asked about 'life-time' discrimination, while we asked about discrimination over the last five years. Rather than see this as a limitation, however, we are inclined to believe that our approach offers some advantages over theirs. Asking about discrimination experienced over one's life-time increases the chances of recall bias. It also means that individual responses are less comparable, as older individuals will have a much longer period of time to draw upon for examples of discrimination than younger individuals. As a result, older individuals will probably always report more discrimination than younger individuals, when it may, in fact, be just the opposite—as our data indicate. Lastly, asking about a specific time period allows for comparisons over time. If scholars repeat the question every five to ten years, they can compare levels of discrimination at Time 1 with levels of discrimination at Time 2. Such comparisons are much more difficult, if the question asks about life-time experiences of discrimination. Thus, while we cannot directly compare our data to those of Mays and Cochran, we believe that our method for measuring perceived discrimination has important advantages.

A further limitation of the present study is that we do not know who discriminates. It is likely that this, too, varies according to context: in the workplace, it is likely that bosses, co-workers or even subordinates discriminate. In the family setting, it is likely that it is parents, siblings, partners or extended family members. In school settings, it is likely that it is other students, faculty or administrative staff. Socially, it is likely to be acquaintances, but it may also be authority figures like the police or just people the non-religious meet. The frequency of discrimination in each of these contexts may vary as well. Addressing these two issues of discrimination against the non-religious would be good topics for future research.

Another concern is that we do not report types of discrimination. This is a concern as it may be that some of the participants in this study report incidents of discrimination that independent parties may not consider

discriminatory. In a separate paper which is currently under review (Hammer et al.), this limitation is addressed by examining the types of discrimination reported by the non-religious.

Another issue of note is that the non-religious may have different strategies for answering a question about their self-identification (e.g. 'What is your religion, if any?'). Some may see themselves as atheists (private self-identification), but may or may not choose to disclose to others (public self-identification) how they see themselves. This is an important distinction, as some participants who privately self-identify may not feel comfortable to disclose their self-identity publicly over the phone to an interviewer who is a complete stranger. Thus, the reported numbers may under-estimate the number of individuals who personally identify as atheists or even disclose this fact to a few trusted confidants (but who are not willing to do so to a stranger over the phone). On the other hand, this is also important because, while some atheists may feel comfortable telling an interviewer their private self-identification, they might not publicly disclose this identity to certain groups of individuals, such as parents, co-workers or acquaintances. Therefore, some individuals who were classified as identifying as atheists in this study may not actually identify as such to others, thereby potentially avoiding certain forms of discrimination.

Finally, an important limitation of this study is the idea that self-identification as 'atheist' or 'agnostic' necessarily indicates a stronger identification with non-religion. We have tried to be clear throughout this article that self-labeling as atheist or agnostic may heighten the out-group status of these individuals in the minds of those hearing the labels, thus increasing the likelihood of discrimination, but we do not mean to suggest that these labels indicate stronger identification with irreligion. Whether or not that is the case is an empirical question: does self-identification as an atheist or agnostic when asked one's religion necessarily mean that someone more strongly identifies with non-religion? This is a question that future research should explore.

Conclusion

Despite the above limitations, this article has established that non-religious individuals perceive discrimination and that a sub-set of the non-religious, those who self-identify as atheists and agnostics, report more discrimination than those who self-identify as nones. Additionally, this article establishes that discrimination varies according to context. While by no means a comprehensive or conclusive study on discrimination against the non-religious, this study should serve as a launching point for addressing the shortcomings outlined above. Future research should explore types of discrimination reported, frequency of discrimination, and a comparison of discrimination rates between the non-religious and the religious and should more closely examine the centrality of self-identification as atheist or agnostic to individuals' irreligious identity.

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NOTES

1. We use the terms 'non-religious' and 'religious none' interchangeably in this article.
2. While it is an empirical question which group experiences more discrimination—LGBs or atheists/agnostics—we believe that LGBs are subject to greater discrimination. We do not want to suggest here that the non-religious experience as much discrimination as LGBs do.
3. There are weights available in ARIS 2008 that transform the silos into their respective populations (e.g. the non-religious range from a sample of 1,106 to a population of 35 million). As the goal of the weights is to inflate the sample to national representativeness, we use the unweighted data. This results in some minor differences in the results (which are available upon request).
4. Income is re-coded into above and below US\$50,000, due to a data collection issue. Participants in ARIS 2008 were initially offered more standard income categories (e.g. 'US\$30,000 but less than US\$40,000'), but were given an additional option if they refused the more specific categories—'less than US\$50,000' or 'more than US\$50,000'. In order to maximize the number of people we could include in our analyses, we used the less specific income categories, despite the fact that doing so reduces specificity and variation.
5. New England = Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island; Middle Atlantic = New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania; East North Central = Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio; West North Central = Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas; South Atlantic = Delaware, Maryland, West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, District of Columbia; East South Central = Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi; West South Central = Arkansas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Texas; Mountain = Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico; Pacific = Washington, Oregon, California, Alaska, Hawaii.
6. There was one person who responded 'humanist'. That person is grouped with the atheists and agnostics in the logistic regressions.
7. The theological classifications in quotes are the options that were presented to participants. The labels are how we refer to these groups in this study.
8. Simple proportions tests indicate significant differences (not shown).

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