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How Anti-Atheist Prejudice Keeps Non-Believing Clergy Silent:

The Clergy Project Participants Share Their Pain

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Abstract

This paper explores the challenges faced by clergy who undergo deconversion from religious faith, focusing on the social, familial, and professional consequences of adopting atheism or nonsupernaturalism. Using case studies from participants of *The Clergy Project* (TCP)—a community for current and former religious leaders who no longer hold supernatural beliefs—this study examines how the social environment shapes the deconversion experience. Through in-depth interviews, surveys, and analysis of over three hundred profiles, of TCP participants from more than twenty countries, this research sheds light on the prejudice faced by nonbelieving clergy. Drawing from diverse cultural contexts, including the U.S., Ivory Coast, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Malaysia, the findings reveal varying levels of social acceptance and the significant risks of discrimination faced by nonbelievers. Participants often encounter stigma, ostracism, and loss of familial and professional ties, leading many to conceal their atheism to avoid social exclusion. The study also highlights how the ability to express nonbelief is shaped by geographic, cultural, and religious factors. The paper argues that atheism remains a marginalized identity, with many clergy members choosing to live as covert apostates to protect their social standing and emotional well-being. It also calls for further research into the intersection of nonbelief, social stigma, and the unique challenges faced by nonbelieving clergy.

Keywords: The Clergy Project, clergy, anti-atheist prejudice, deconversion, atheophobia, social stigma, secularism

Introduction

Numerous studies indicate that atheists worldwide encounter significant discrimination and, in some cases, persecution.¹ In certain societies, they confront systemic and institutionalized discrimination. According to the *Freedom of Thought Report 2023* by Humanists International² humanists are discriminated against in 186 countries across the globe. In addition to other areas of discrimination, the report specifically asserts that government figures or state agencies openly marginalize, harass, or incite hatred or violence against the non-religious in 11 countries; that it is illegal or unrecognized to identify as an atheist or as non-religious in 15 countries; that the non-religious are barred from holding at least some offices in 23 countries; that it is difficult or illegal to run an overtly humanist organization in 32 countries; that blasphemy remains a punishable offense in at least 87 countries across the globe; and that the provision of mandatory religious instruction in state-funded schools without a secular or humanist alternative occurs in 33 countries.

According to a 2014 international Pew survey,³ 53 percent of Americans, 70 percent of Indians, 86 percent of Brazilians, 89 percent of Malaysians, 93 percent of Filipinos, 95 percent of Egyptians, and 99 percent of Indonesians, believe that it is necessary to believe in God in order to be moral. Despite multiple studies demonstrating that

1 See Cottee, Simon. *The Apostates: When Muslims Leave Islam* (Hurst, 2015); Edgell, P. A., Hartmann, D., Stewart, E., & Gerteis, J. H. "Atheists and other cultural outsiders: Moral boundaries and the non-religious in the United States." *Social Forces* 95, no.2 (2016): 607-638; Gervais, Will M., Dimitris Xygalatas, Ryan T. McKay, Michiel van Elk, Emma E. Buchtel, Mark Aveyard, Sarah R. Schiavone, Ilan Dar-Nimrod, Annika M. Svedholm-Häkkinen, Tapani Riekkii, Eva Kundtová Klocová, Jonathan E. Ramsay, and Joseph Bulbulia. "Global Evidence of Extreme Intuitive Moral Prejudice against Atheists." *Nature Human Behaviour* vol. 2, issue 6, (2017): 425; Zuckerman, Phil. *What It Means to Be Moral: Why Religion Is Not Necessary for Living an Ethical Life* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2019).

2 Wadsworth-Jones, Emma and Elizabeth O'Casey editors. 2023. *Freedom of Thought Report*. Key Countries Edition by Humanists International.

3 Pew Research Center. (2014, March 13). "Worldwide, many see belief in God as essential to morality." Retrieved from www.pewglobal.org/2014/03/13/worldwide-many-see-belief-in-god-as-essential-to-morality/

portraying the nonreligious population as immoral is not objective,⁴ various stereotypes directed towards atheists are widespread.⁵ This environment makes it exceedingly difficult and perilous to be an openly avowed nonbeliever in numerous parts of the world. A study by Penny Edgell and colleagues⁶ concludes that a considerable portion of Americans perceive atheists as immoral, leading them to be inclined to believe that atheists do not align with their vision of America and to disapprove of their son or daughter marrying an atheist. As a result, the phenomenon of atheophobia—the fear and/or hatred of atheists or atheism—is widespread. Robert Nash offers a definition of atheophobia as “...the fear and loathing of atheists that permeates American culture.”⁷

Among individuals who espouse by atheism or religious skepticism, there exists a distinctive category of religious professionals who, at some point in their lives, embraced a naturalistic worldview, dismissing superstitions and supernatural agencies like gods, souls, or spirits. Due to the aforementioned biases against nonbelievers, these former or current nonbelieving religious professionals also experience social isolation. As the findings of this research indicate, many of them opt to conceal their stigmatized identity.⁸

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- 4 See Cragun, Ryan, and Jesse Smith. *Goodbye Religion: The Causes and Consequences of Secularization* (New York University Press, 2024); Franz, Berkeley, and R. Khari Brown. “Race, Religion and Support for the Affordable Care Act.” *Review of Religious Research* 62, no. 1 (2020): 101–20; Kasselstrand, Zuckerman, and Cragun. *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society* (New York University Press, 2023); Piazza, Jared. “‘If You Love Me Keep My Commandments’: Religiosity Increases Preference for Rule-Based Moral Arguments.” *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 22, no. 4 (2012): 285–302; Saslow, Laura R., Robb Willer, Matthew Feinberg, Paul K. Piff, Katharine Clark, Dacher Keltner, and Sarina R. Saturn. “My Brother’s Keeper? Compassion Predicts Generosity More Among Less Religious Individuals.” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 4, no. 1 (2013): 31–38.
- 5 Abbott, D. M., & Mollen, D. “Atheism as a concealable stigmatized identity: Outness, anticipated stigma, and well-being.” *The Counseling Psychologist* 46, no. 6 (2018): 685–707; Brewster, Melanie E., Joseph Hammer, Jacob S. Sawyer, Austin Eklund, and Joseph Palamar. “Perceived Experiences of Atheist Discrimination: Instrument Development and Evaluation.” *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 63, no. 5 (October 2016): 557–70; Brooks, E. Marshall. *Disenchanted Lives: Apostasy and Ex-Mormonism among the Latter-day Saints* (Rutgers University Press, 2018); Giddings, Leah, and Thomas J. Dunn. “The Robustness of Anti-Atheist Prejudice as Measured by Way of Cognitive Errors.” *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 26, no. 2 (April 21, 2015): 124–35; Harper, M. “The stereotyping of nonreligious people by religious students: Contents and subtypes.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46, no. 4, (2007): 539–552.
- 6 Edgell et al., *Atheists and other cultural outsiders*, 629.
- 7 Nash, Robert J. “Inviting Atheists to the Table: A Modest Proposal for Higher Education.” *Religion & Education* 30, no. 1 (2003), 1.
- 8 cf. Abbott, D. M., & Mollen, D. *Atheism as a concealable stigmatized identity*; Yeatts, Paul, Dena Abbott, and Debra Mollen. “Development and Evaluation of the Atheist Identity Concealment Scale.” *Journal of Religion and Health* 61, no. 4 (2022): 3525–3541.

To support individuals in this situation, The Clergy Project⁹ (TCP) was established in 2011. Its objective is to create a secure online community of forums comprised exclusively of religious leaders who no longer adhere to supernatural beliefs. As of 2024, it has over 1300 members from over 50 countries. Drawing on in-depth interviews and surveys with TCP participants from more than twenty countries and five continents, this research illustrates how they navigate their deconversion from faith while contending with biases against nonbelievers.

Atheist Identities

As outlined in earlier work,¹⁰ this study examined participants' preferred self-identification following deconversion, as well as their attitudes toward being labeled "atheist." Notably, only 15% of participants easily or proudly identified as "atheists," while 47% rejected the label altogether. Among the 53% who accepted the term, 60% also adopted additional descriptors, such as "Humanist," "Secular Humanist," "Agnostic," and "Non-theist." Of the 47% of respondents who were uncomfortable with the label "atheist," two distinct groups emerged: 41% expressed negative feelings toward identifying as atheists, with some rejecting the term entirely. The remaining 59% did not oppose the term itself but chose to avoid it because of the social stigma and the "baggage" it carried. They felt that many people associate atheists with negative stereotypes, viewing them as immoral or as hostile adversaries of religion.

Although Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett are regarded as the founders of the Clergy Project, TCP participants expressed a range of opinions when asked about their views on the New Atheism Movement, especially its prominent figures—Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens. 27% showed support, 40% voiced criticism and disapproval, while 33% took a neutral stance. Furthermore, even among those who had a favorable view of New Atheism, none offered an outright endorsement; every respondent who showed some support also recognized the movement's flaws. This

9 For details see: <https://clergyproject.org/clergy-project-history/>

10 Zamuşinski, Alexandr. "Understanding the Role of The Clergy Project: Misconceptions and Realities of a Support Network for Nonbelieving Clergy." *Secularism and Nonreligion*, 14, no. 1 (2025): 1-14.

study thus reveals a range of approaches to atheist identity among non-believing clergy, also establishing a spectrum of perspectives on the New Atheist Movement that spans from strong approval to harsh critique. This demonstrates that the vast majority of respondents are not “militant atheists” or “anti-religious.”

Overview of the problem – Not Worthy of Trust

In this article, when discussing “Anti-Atheist Prejudice,” I refer to it broadly as a biased and negative attitude towards atheists, agnostics, nonbelievers, and similar individuals. The idea that atheists are immoral or amoral or that atheism necessarily leads to moral degradation is a prejudice with historical precedence. In 1947, in his celebrated *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, Lucien Febvre claimed that Rabelais not only had not been an atheist but could not have been an atheist. Febvre claimed that no one could have been an atheist until Descartes made it conceptually possible. However, in *Battling the Gods*,¹¹ Tim Whitmarsh demonstrates that ancient historical records suggest that atheism is as natural to humans as religion. In addition, the idea of atheophobia goes at least as far back as Plato, who, in his *Tenth Book of the Dialogue on Laws*,¹² advocated draconian measures against atheists and people we would call deists. Plato’s recommended punishment for atheists was death. At best, he believed that such people must be isolated from society. The philosopher considered nonbelievers to be possessed by disease and regarded them as state criminals who would provoke societal disturbance if left unchecked.

Today, nonbelievers are one of the most distrusted minority groups in the US as well as the world.¹³ Cornell historians Moore and Kramnick claim, “Atheists remain the most disliked religious minority in America.”¹⁴ According to *The Freedom of Thought Report*

11 Whitmarsh, Tim. *Battling the Gods* (Faber & Faber, 2015).

12 See *Plato Against the Atheists, or the Tenth Book of the Dialogue on Laws*. Printed in 1845 by Harper & Brothers, New York. Laws 9, 10.

13 See Cottee, *The Apostates*; Edgell et al., *Atheists and other cultural outsiders*; Gervais, Will M., Azim F. Shariff, and Ara Norenzayan. “Do You Believe in Atheists? Distrust Is Central to Anti-Atheist Prejudice.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101, no. 6 (2011): 1189–1206.

14 Moore L., Kramnick I. *Godless Citizens in a Godly Republic: Atheists in American Public Life* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 161.

by the International Humanist,¹⁵ atheists in 11 countries with Muslim majority can face official punishment by death for atheism, apostasy, or blasphemy (as in the case of Pakistan). Sudan, Somalia, and Libya only recently abolished their apostasy laws. The report highlights numerous discriminatory laws, regulations, and cases against nonbelievers worldwide, asserting that nonbelievers encounter systemic discrimination in most countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as Africa, Asia, and Europe.

As mentioned earlier, one of the most severe biases against nonbelievers is the perception of their ethical inferiority. The equation is straightforward: if, in the minds of many people, religion is linked to morality, then irreligion is automatically associated with immorality. Based on this prejudice, various related misunderstandings can take root. For instance, nonbelievers may face discrimination and challenges when seeking employment, gaining child custody, running for office, establishing an organization or club, promoting their worldview, providing witness testimony in court, or serving on a jury. A study by Giddings and Dunn established that people's distrust of atheists is "deeply and culturally ingrained." The study found widespread "prejudice" against atheists and concluded, "Anti-atheist prejudice is not confined either to dominantly religious countries or to religious individuals but rather appears to be a robust judgment about atheists."¹⁶

A nationally representative survey in the US¹⁷ found that 41 percent of atheists reported experiencing discrimination in the previous five years as a result of their lack of religious identification. Hammer et al.¹⁸ discovered that nearly 97% of individuals identifying as atheists reported experiencing slander, while 93% faced coercion. Additionally, close to 60% reported feelings of social ostracization, almost 14% were victims of hate crimes, and nearly 84% experienced unspecified acts of discrimination. Melanie Brewster, who

15 The Freedom of Thought Report 2020: A Global Report on the Rights, Legal Status and Discrimination Against Humanists, Atheists and the Non-religious, by International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), p. 13.

16 Giddings and Dunn, *The Robustness of Anti-Atheist Prejudice*, Abstract.

17 Cragun, R., B. A. Kosmin, A. Keysar, J. Hammer, and M. Nielson. "On the Receiving End: Discrimination toward the Non-religious in the United States." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27, (2012): 105–127.

18 Hammer, J. H., Cragun, R. T., Hwang, K., & Smith, J. M. "Forms, frequency, and correlates of perceived anti-atheist discrimination." *Secularism and Nonreligion* 1, (2012): 43–67.

studies marginalized groups and examines how experiences of discrimination and stigma may shape the mental health of minority group members, claims in her 2014 work, *Atheists in America*, that the prevalence of atheophobic attitudes shapes atheists' experiences. As a result, atheists report significant discrimination in schools, at their places of employment, within the legal system, and in many other settings. In 2011, Gervais et al. found that believers distrust atheists as much as they do rapists. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that nonbelievers in America often feel socially isolated. They are not respected by their leaders or neighbors. There are organizations with an "anyone but atheists" membership policy. For example, the Boy Scouts of America openly rejects atheists while accepting members of any and all religions. The Veterans of Foreign Wars, a leading veteran's group in the US, rescinded a similar ban on atheists only in 2004. Brewster shares findings of her studies in which several thousand atheists were asked to recall how frequently they felt they were treated as if they were immoral, ostracized, made to feel ashamed, and/or asked to conceal their atheism. She concludes:

We found that the more participants experienced this atheophobic maltreatment, the higher their levels of psychological distress and social isolation were. Thus, experiencing stigma for being atheist has real ramifications for mental health.¹⁹

A 2020 report, *Being Nonreligious in America*, also supports these findings.²⁰

The participants in this study recounted experiences congruent with the findings delineated in the aforementioned studies. They encountered challenges akin to social ostracism from both peers and family, as well as instances of slander and coercion. Moreover, they were subjected to portrayals depicting them as ethically inferior, sinful, or potentially possessed by evil spirits. Notably, certain presumptions emerged, such as the inference that a lack of belief in God automatically implies belief in or worship of the Devil.

19 Brewster Melanie, 2021. "Atheophobia" - <https://bstigmafree.org/blog/atheophobia/>, accessed April 25, 2023.

20 Frazer, S., El-Shafei, A., Gill, A.M. *Reality Check: Being Nonreligious in America*. Cranford, NJ: American Atheists. 2020.

Methodology

Since May 2021, I have conducted in-depth interviews with forty-one religious professionals who transitioned from belief to non-belief. These interviews were conducted online via platforms such as Zoom or Skype, or through phone conversations, with durations ranging from 1 to 3 hours. In some cases, respondents were interviewed multiple times. Additionally, eighteen participants opted to respond to an extensive interview questionnaire comprising over 30 questions. Subsequently, I followed up with many of them for further clarification and discussion of specific answers. Moreover, I had the opportunity to explore over five hundred personal profiles of TCP participants within their SafetyNet community, reviewing more than three hundred of these profiles. These profiles are structured to allow TCP participants to share their journey from faith to non-belief.

The respondents, limited to those who were interviewed or submitted written interviews, represent a diverse range of at least twenty-four countries across five continents, with participants from the U.S. hailing from over ten different states. The mean age of my informants is 53 years, with a median value of 51, with ages spanning a broad range — from the youngest at twenty-three to the oldest at eighty-six. Of the total, forty-four identified as men, eight as women, and five as non-binary. The leadership of TCP has provided me with access and made a public announcement introducing my study and my positionality as a researcher. As a result, many participants have reached out to me directly, expressing their interest in joining the project and offering to answer research questions.

Findings

Why do people fear atheists?

Understanding the roots of this fear can shed light on the biases and misconceptions that surround nonbelievers. Unlike those who always have been secular or indifferent to religion, this research explores intriguing perspectives from individuals who were once very religiously devout and then joined the “enemy camp”. Suddenly they became perceived as traitors. Jerry DeWitt, a former

fundamentalist minister from Louisiana and participant in TCP, aptly expressed this transformation, stating, “To some people, I’m the enemy—a turncoat. Almost like an American soldier suddenly being found working for al-Qaeda.”²¹ These individuals, having undergone a profound reconsideration of their personal ontology and axiology, are now asked to reflect on why individuals in their immediate environment might harbor apprehensions or fears toward atheism or atheists. It is noteworthy that, not long ago, many of these same individuals viewed the world through the lens of atheophobia. Thus, the experiences of these religious professionals are particularly potent. The subsequent section delves into the reflections shared by some of these clergy.

Possessed by Demons or Devil worshipers

Joey Fire Lane Deer, a spiritual leader within the Lakota-Sioux tribe, held roles such as a medium, seer, interpreter of dreams, and ceremonial instructor. After watching multiple videos with Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Matt Dillahunty, they²² became an atheist and, as they put it, “a vocal, proselytizing nonbeliever.” Joey notes that misconceptions arise, with some people presuming that, by disavowing belief in a god, Joey must adhere to a belief in the Devil. This assumption perplexes Joey, who clarifies their non-Christian background and disassociation from the concept of the Devil. They add:

I’ve met people who think I’m a shitty person for not believing in a god as if I’m insulting the idea of a god by not believing in one and thus hurting the feelings of their god. I think people fear anything they can’t understand, and people who are theists don’t understand atheists.

Similarly, several respondents have pointed to such association with the Devil or Satan. As one TCP member from Michigan expressed, they are sometimes viewed as the “emissary of the Devil”

21 Interview with Washington Post, Nov. 21 2013, “From Pentecostal pastor to atheist organizer” https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/onbackground/from-pentecostal-pastor-to-atheist-organizer/2013/11/21/01389602-52e2-11e3-a7f0-b790929232e1_video.html Accessed on Jan. 24, 2024.

22 Prefers they/them pronouns.

Jane, who is a seminary graduate and a chaplain from Wisconsin, also noticed that some people associate non-believers with Devil worshippers. Jane even had to educate someone because they thought if Jane is not a believer, then they²³ believe in the Devil and put curses on them. That person believed that everything bad that happened to her was because of Jane, and she spread such rumors about Jane. As a result, some people who knew Jane started avoiding them, occasionally even crossing the street. When asked what they lost as a result of their deconversion, Jane responded that they lost family, friends, and financial security.

Steve, a former Wesleyan pastor from Ohio also noticed that believers “fear atheists because of the stigma that is spread in the past, especially through churches, that atheists are evil and following Satan, as if we sacrifice children.” According to Steve, this negative portrayal has persisted for generations, and it highlights how deeply entrenched misconceptions about atheism are, often making it difficult for former believers to be accepted in their communities.

Mihaylo, the son of a pastor and who was a worship leader at a local Adventist church in Ukraine, conveyed the significant challenges he faced upon revealing his disbelief to his mother. The disclosure evoked intense emotional distress in his mother, leading to tears and an eventual proclamation that Mihaylo was purportedly possessed by malevolent forces, specifically the Devil and evil spirits. The profound difficulty she experienced stemmed from an inability to reconcile with the notion that her son had adopted atheism. This manifestation of prejudice, wherein disbelief is erroneously associated with Satanism, Devil possession, or Devil worship, proves to be a notable and consequential phenomenon for individuals navigating the complexities of deconversion from religion. The studies by Brewster and Cottee²⁴ confirm this prejudice. In some instances, respondents in Brewster’s study reported being called “Satan,”²⁵ while Cottee shares stories in which his respondents were taken by their family members into a mosque so that an imam could perform an exorcism on them to cast out the Devil.

23 Prefers they/them pronouns.

24 Brewster Melanie E. *Atheists in America* (Columbia University Press, 2014); Cottee, *The Apostates*.

25 Brewster, *Atheists in America*, 214.

Immorality: “You just cannot be an atheist, you are such a nice person”

John Compere, a fifth-generation Baptist minister, a founding member of The Clergy Project and its vice-president, who also headed its screening committee, reminded the case when his mother told him: “You just cannot be an atheist, you are such a nice person.” In other words, in her mind atheist was a bad person. John added that people much too often make the mistake of equating ethical morality with religious belief — an assumption secular humanists are hard at work to disprove. Željko a former Seventh-day Adventist pastor from Croatia acknowledged that most people think that atheists are unethical. Charles, who is a retired Episcopal priest from Utah, stated:

Even some very progressive Christians feel that it is permissible to disparage atheists. I have been surprised by that more than once. I attribute the origin of that to hundreds of years of the Church insisting that atheists are evil and dangerous and that only theists have the potential to live loving, moral lives.

This quote echoes the findings of Melanie Brewster, who attempts “to debunk the myth that atheophobia is restricted only to the Bible Belt.”²⁶ Describing her personal story, Brewster mentions how she suddenly realized how stigmatized atheists are in the United States:

This stigma runs so deep that even in a large, public university amongst psychology doctoral students – who are, by the way, notoriously liberal and open-minded – it was completely acceptable to believe that being nice and being atheist were mutually exclusive identities to hold.²⁷

Amir, a former Muslim religious leader from Saudi Arabia, noticed that within the Muslim community, people often associate atheists with very foolish individuals who simply follow their lust. Steve, a former Wesleyan pastor from Ohio, has observed a recurring pattern in interactions with believers upon the revelation of his

²⁶ Brewster, *Atheists in America*, 21.

²⁷ Brewster Melanie, “Atheophobia.”

atheism. He notes that believers occasionally pose inquiries such as, “How do you determine what is good or evil?” or express skepticism, questioning why they should heed his perspectives since he does not adhere to the Bible. Steve contends that this enduring stigma persists largely due to the historical suppression of atheist voices. Therefore, he advocates for a proactive approach wherein atheists openly embrace the label “atheist.” Steve believes that by doing so, individuals can contribute to dispelling the unwarranted stigma surrounding atheism, fostering a more informed and nuanced understanding of atheist perspectives.

Godless Communists

Some respondents linked atheophobia to the times of the Cold War and period of geopolitical tension between the Western Bloc and the Eastern Bloc, so-called ‘Godless Communist Bloc’. Among them is Luke, who in his early thirties, made the transition to church planting and served as a national adviser with both the Association of Life Giving Churches (ALC) and the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). Recognized for his close association with Ted Haggard, he quickly gained prominence and was named one of the “Top 300” influential evangelical pastors in America. Currently Luke is a TCP member and during the interview he attributed the stigma against atheists to the government, specifically pointing to the historical association of atheists with godless communists by the American government.²⁸

Benjamin, from Washington state, who grew up in the Jehovah’s Witnesses church and later was appointed as an elder in the church structure, shared that:

The term atheist has become a dog whistle like socialist... I think people fear atheists the same way they fear homosexuals, which is to say, they really don’t. They’ve been taught to hate atheists because they represent an existential threat to their belief system. If the entire infrastructure of your existence (sense of self, family, church, community, country,

28 See also Moore and Kramnick, *Godless Citizens*; and Kruse, Kevin. *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

etc.) is founded on a singular belief, and all someone has to do to undermine everything is not believe, that's a precarious position to be in.

In the following section, I present examples of how the biases mentioned above, as well as other biases, are manifested among the family and community members of the respondents in this research.

Family

Numerous studies underscore the pivotal role played by the transmission of religiosity from immediate family members to subsequent generations.²⁹ Research on deconversion and apostasy reveal the myriad challenges individuals face when divulging their loss of faith to family members.³⁰ Brooks, in his examinations of the crisis of apostasy within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS or Mormons), underscores the pervasive belief among church members in the enduring nature of familial bonds, stating, "families are forever".³¹ Consequently, he concludes that this strong emphasis on family significantly amplifies the difficulty of leaving the church.³²

This research of TCP participants affirms the heightened burden associated with disclosing disbelief to family members, particularly parents.³³ Certain religious traditions instill the belief that familial

29 Baker-Sperry, Lori. "Passing on the Faith: The Father's Role in Religious Transmission." *Sociological Focus* 34, no 2 (2001): 185–98; Bengtson, Vern L., Norella M. Putney, and Susan Harris. *Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down across Generations* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013); Bader, Christopher D., and Scott A. Desmond. "Do as I say and as I do: The Effects of Consistent Parental Beliefs and Behaviors Upon Religious Transmission." *Sociology of Religion* 67, no. 3 (2006): 313–329; Kelley, Jonathan, and Nan Dirk De Graaf. "National Context, Parental Socialization, and Religious Belief: Results from 15 Nations." *American Sociological Review* 62, no.4 (1997): 639–59; Martin, Todd F., James M. White, and Daniel Perlman. "Religious Socialization: A Test of the Channeling Hypothesis of Parental Influence on Adolescent Faith Maturity." *Journal of Adolescent Research* 18, no. 2 (2003): 169–87.

30 Altemeyer, B. and Hunsberger, B. *Amazing Conversions: Why Some Turn to Faith & Others Abandon Religion* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1997); Brewster, *Atheists in America*; Brooks, *Disenchanted Lives*; Cottee, *The Apostates*; Fader, Ayala. *Hidden Heretics: Jewish Doubt in the Digital Age* (Princeton University Press, 2021); Swann, Daniel. *A Qualitative Study of Black Atheists: "Don't Tell Me You're One of Those!"* (Lexington Books, 2020).

31 Brooks, *Disenchanted Lives*, 169.

32 Brooks, *Disenchanted Lives*, 169.

33 cf. Cottee, *The Apostates*; Hendricks, J.J., Hardy, S.A., Taylor, E.M. and Dollahite, D.C. (2024), "Does Leaving Faith Mean Leaving Family? Longitudinal Associations Between Religious Identification and Parent-Child Relationships Across Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 63: 23–41.

bonds endure eternally in the afterlife. Consequently, becoming an apostate may be perceived as a threat to salvation, leading to separation from one's family in the hereafter. For instance, Erick, a former Pentecostal youth pastor from Wisconsin, experienced a profound impact. The day Erick hinted at the potential loss of his faith to his father, his father suffered a heart attack, later attributing it to their conversation that day. Erick even assumed that his parents might react more positively if he were to tell them that he is gay or that he has a problem with drugs. Consequently, he approaches discussions with caution, being mindful not to exert undue pressure, particularly with his parents and grandparents.

Gary, a retired minister formerly associated with the United Church of Christ in Wisconsin, expresses apprehension about jeopardizing relationships that he does not have to lose. At the age of 67 during the interview, Gary, cognizant of his less-than-optimal health, articulates a preference for avoiding unnecessary struggles and emotional stress, motivating his reluctance to take risk of sharing his disbelief.

Cindy, a former Salvation Army officer from Illinois, notes another pattern in her observations. She shares her experience of concealing her deconversion from her grandmother to spare her feelings. According to Cindy, younger individuals exhibit less surprise upon learning of someone's nonreligious stance, whereas older individuals often struggle to reconcile the idea that a nonreligious person can be virtuous. This phenomenon aligns with the earlier-discussed experience of John Compere and others.

William, who is still actively involved in a Pentecostal church in South Africa, encounters challenges in disclosing his disbelief to his mother. Some TCP members openly admit that they would refrain from openly declaring their nonbelief while their parents are still alive. Ricardo, currently an Assistant Pastor in a Baptist church in Texas and the son of a pastor, exhibits considerable caution regarding the prospect of disclosing his nonbelief to his family. Given the potential for negative repercussions, he remains apprehensive about their possible reactions. Ricardo is acquainted with accounts from participants in The Clergy Project who have

faced adverse outcomes upon revealing their nonbelief. Moreover, his circle of friends includes individuals who, upon disclosing their atheism to their parents during their late teens, found themselves compelled to leave their parents' homes. Subsequently, they had to navigate independent living due to strained familial relationships. Considering these experiences, Ricardo harbors apprehensions that his family and friends may struggle to comprehend his perspective. His concern is heightened by the presence of three children, amplifying the perceived risks associated with such a revelation.

Simultaneously, the study brought to light narratives of individuals who opted to disclose their nonbelief to immediate family members, often resulting in profound and deleterious consequences. Such individuals encountered divorces and the dissolution of relationships with cherished family members. The research reveals that biases against atheists are so deeply entrenched that they lead to ostracism and rejection of family members who have lost their faith. The disclosure of such loss may be interpreted as an act of betrayal.³⁴ Brooks discusses how "ex-Mormons are often told or made to feel that they deserve to be suffering [for their apostasy] ... Losing faith is seen as a result of spiritual laziness or rebelliousness, and former members are considered failures."³⁵

Steve, an Evangelical worship leader and psychological counselor from Michigan, shared a poignant account of the profound losses he experienced following the revelation of his disbelief to his wife. Speaking of his family members and people in community Steve stated:

No one is going to choose me over their God or their belief. In order to maintain that their God is good and their belief is good... they have to reject me. People ... reject their own family members over these things, and that's what I've experienced. My life partner is afraid of who I've become; she thinks that I've radically changed who I am as a person, which is not true. I'm still a caring, and compassionate, and kind, and honest person, and authentic, and genuine. But the irony of maintaining my integrity about this

³⁴ Brewster, *Atheists in America*, 45.

³⁵ Brooks, *Disenchanted Lives*, 119.

is exactly what is getting me rejected. As it turns out, having integrity and coming to terms with the truth is what gets me called a phony, a fraud, and a deceiver.

Steve recounted that one of the most agonizing aspects of his experience was the estrangement from his elder son, who had previously regarded him as a hero. Before this revelation, Steve would always receive Father's Day and birthday cards. However, now, Steve's attempts at communication were met with silence. His wife and father-in-law allegedly informed the children of Steve's atheist stance, further deteriorating their perception of him and resulting in a loss of trust and respect. Despite repeated efforts to reconcile with his son, Steve encountered rejection on multiple occasions. Even his closest friend rejected him when he attempted to share his inner struggles. The shift in Steve's beliefs resulted in a negative and confrontational reaction. All this is causing profound social and emotional hardships. Thus, many prefer not to come out even to their family members. As Fader reports in her study of hidden apostates within the Orthodox Judaism: "The fear of divorce, which was stigmatizing to entire families for generations, kept many double lifers, but especially women, in the heretical closet."³⁶

Another poignant case is exemplified in the experiences of Jerry DeWitt, a former evangelical preacher from Louisiana. Following his disclosure as a nonbeliever, DeWitt not only endured the dissolution of his marriage but also faced ostracism within his community. In his book, *Hope after Faith*, DeWitt elucidates the final catalyst for his wife's decision, citing the pervasive religious atmosphere in their small Louisiana town, where rumors circulated about her union with an atheist:

"We can't move," I told Kelli. "Every preacher who comes out as an atheist shouldn't have to move five hundred miles away. We've invested our lives in this community." To me, moving felt like pleading guilty to a crime or like being a convicted child molester who is forced to leave the community. I also believed that my coming out as an atheist had already cost my

36 Fader, *Hidden Heretics*, 93.

family so much that giving up our home was a price I was unwilling to bear. And I hoped that if anyone could overcome the struggles of a life as an atheist in a deeply religious community like DeRidder, it could be me.³⁷

Despite his resolute determination, DeWitt ultimately found it necessary to depart from his hometown. The intolerable humiliation he endured during routine visits to local establishments such as Walmart, the post office, or a bank prompted a reconsideration of his position, compelling him to relocate from DeRidder. This transition segues into the subsequent section, delving into the biases and ostracism that nonbelieving religious professionals may encounter due to the social context in which they reside.

Community, Society

In the case of Jerry DeWitt, the influence of the social environment is notably evident. Had he been a pastor in a metropolitan area like Los Angeles, managing his deconversion might have been considerably smoother. However, DeWitt hails from DeRidder, a small town with a population of approximately 9000 situated in the Bible Belt. In his circumstance, the moment his deconversion occurred, many people in his town became aware of his transition to atheism. Therefore, the ease of navigating such a transformation is significantly contingent upon the prevailing social and national context. In certain regions of the world, identifying as an atheist poses minimal challenges.³⁸ In the course of this study, TCP participants from the UK, Germany, Sweden, and Finland affirmed that openly declaring atheism in many European countries poses no problem. Conversely, respondents from other parts of the world often asserted that openly declaring atheism in their social context would jeopardize a significant portion of their social capital and relationships.

37 DeWitt, Jerry with Ethan Brown. *Hope after Faith: An Ex-Pastor's Journey from Belief to Atheism* (Da Capo, 2013), 207.

38 See Zuckerman, Phil, Luke W. Galen, Frank L. Pasquale. *The Nonreligious: Understanding Secular People and Societies* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 103-104.

An illustrative case is that of Mohamed, a former Muslim leader from Ivory Coast, who currently resides in the United States. Mohamed highlights the value of living in the U.S., where he can assert his own voice, take control of his life, and pursue independence. In contrast, he reflects on the challenges he would face if he remained in Ivory Coast, attributing the difficulty to the prevalent dependence on community ties in his home country. Mohamed posits that in such a cultural setting, the process of adopting a non-believer identity would be more arduous, and if undertaken, it would likely necessitate concealment from others.

Similarly, Faraz, hailing from Pakistan and the grandson of a renowned Islamic Scholar, presents a compelling narrative. As a Quran hafiz entrusted with leading prayers in the local mosque, he elucidates on the societal dynamics in Pakistan, where individuals born into the Muslim faith cannot reject Islam. The societal fabric is structured in a manner that exerts pressure on individuals to adhere to Islamic beliefs and observe Muslim traditions and rituals, encompassing daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, and animal sacrifices, among others.

Fardad, a Zoroastrian priest originally from India now residing in the US, disclosed that within his community, trust is predominantly placed in individuals who exhibit strong religious commitment and engage in frequent prayer. Conversely, those lacking religious adherence find it challenging to earn trust. Following a prolonged internal struggle, Fardad chose to reveal his disbelief to his wife, hoping for understanding. Regrettably, she did not keep his secret confidential and, despite Fardad's request, shared it with relatives and friends. Consequently, the revelation disappointed many, including Fardad's parents, leading to a diminished standing within the community. Now perceived as less ethical, Fardad must actively demonstrate his trustworthiness to regain the community's confidence.

Amir, a former Muslim religious leader from Saudi Arabia, made the difficult decision to leave the country, forfeiting a successful career in his own law firm due to concerns for his safety. He expressed the fear that if his loss of faith were to become public knowledge, it could lead to imprisonment or even execution. Observing the reactions

of some friends and his wife, who divorced him upon learning of his disbelief, Amir opted to keep this secret from his mother. In his words, “perhaps I don’t want her to hate me or discontent her relation with me.” He further explained that within the Muslim community, there is a strong aversion to atheists, as they are viewed as enemies of God, which contributes to the negative perception and treatment of those who do not adhere to religious beliefs.

Pepper, hailing from Malaysia, shared the numerous challenges faced by atheists in his country. Not being a Muslim himself, Pepper’s journey took him through Rhema Bible College in Australia. Upon graduation he returned to Malaysia and worked in full-time ministry for five years. Subsequently, he actively served as a lay pastor in the children’s church and youth group of the Methodist church until he experienced a loss of faith. Pepper highlighted that, due to his non-Muslim status, he enjoys the freedom to openly share his disbelief and even runs a blog where he occasionally expresses atheistic ideas. However, he emphasized that he refrains from being a militant atheist due to the significant threats he would face. In Malaysia, individuals are required to declare their religion on official documents, and changing one’s religion is prohibited by law for Muslims. The discovery of a Muslim’s lack of faith could lead to reporting to authorities, potential orders to divorce, and children remaining with the believing parent. Pepper is acquainted with nonbelieving ex-Muslims who maintain a low profile, quietly socializing with non-Muslims and embracing a secular lifestyle (e.g., consuming pork or alcohol) while pretending to be Muslim when questioned. Moreover, Malaysia imposes restrictions on the marriage of Muslim women to non-Muslim men, while Muslim men face no such limitations. Additionally, registering an official atheist or humanist organization is impossible in Malaysia. Pepper cited an example where a humanist conference was canceled, and participants faced attacks and death threats.

Hence, within certain national contexts, the extent of discrimination and social exclusion is influenced by factors such as one’s family background and the religious beliefs they held before renouncing them. Subsequent examples will illustrate that organizational policies toward apostates may also play a significant role. Ben, who dedicated

over 15 years as a pioneer and nearly 20 years as an Elder for Jehovah's Witnesses in Australia, elucidated the challenging dynamics within his church. He described a tradition of severe disfellowshipping, to the extent that family members are prohibited from communicating with the affected individual. Potential ostracism caused significant internal struggles for Ben, who feared for the strength of his marriage. The fear of potential fallout led him to withhold this information from his wife, uncertain about the resilience of their relationship. After candid discussions with elders in the church, Ben eventually chose to resign. His departure was publicly declared as apostasy, resulting in the estrangement of even close relatives, such as his sister. What proved more distressing was the subsequent ostracization of his wife by church members, despite her continued belief in and attendance at the church. According to Ben, to many within the church she is now also regarded as an apostate.

Matt, a former leader within the Jehovah's Witnesses church from North Carolina, recounted the profound pain of being shunned by friends and family. Despite being a dedicated member of their community and having served as a missionary in several Latin American countries, Matt found himself abandoned by friends and family alike when they learned about his loss of faith. At the age of 38, with all his contacts tied to the Jehovah's Witnesses church, Matt faced the daunting task of rebuilding his life from the ground up. He expressed the considerable difficulty of forming new, trustworthy friendships at such a stage in life. Thus, it becomes clear that the level of individual autonomy, especially in matters of belief, is significantly contingent upon the national and cultural context, with one's geographical origin and background exerting substantial influence.³⁹

Employment

Gervais et al. (2011) reported that atheists in the United States have lower employment prospects. The survey on distrust of atheists demonstrates that respondents significantly preferred

39 cf. Inglehart, Ronald. *Religion's Sudden Decline: What's Causing it, and What Comes Next?* (Oxford University Press, 2021); Kasselstrand, Zuckerman, and Cragun. *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society* (New York University Press, 2023); Streib, H., Hood, R. W., Keller, B., Csöff, R.-M., & Silver, C. *Deconversion: Qualitative and quantitative results from cross-cultural research in Germany and the United States of America* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009).

religious candidates to the atheist candidate for a high-trust job (as a daycare worker), conversely, participants marginally preferred the atheist candidate to the religious candidate for a low-trust job (as a waitress).⁴⁰ Another report suggests that this is especially relevant for atheists who are residents of “very religious” communities.⁴¹ In their 2012 study, Hammer and colleagues explored the experiences of atheist individuals facing discrimination in the US. They found that overt and severe discrimination, comprising denied employment or educational opportunities, was reported by 9% of the participants. *American Atheists* also reported employment discrimination “in the name of religion” in 2019.⁴² Various cases also reveal that if their nonbelieving identity is discovered after being hired, they may face discrimination, potentially resulting in job loss. Two prime examples are Richard Mullens in 2009 in Texas⁴³ and Abby Nurre in 2010 in Iowa,⁴⁴ both of whom are teachers. This study of nonbelieving religious professionals identified similar challenges and patterns.

A TCP participant Jane, is a seminary graduate and a chaplain from Wisconsin. They emphasized that despite openly disclosing their sexual identity subsequent to their deconversion from faith, their sexuality has not posed any challenges in their role at the hospice. Jane freely expresses their gender identity by wearing a badge stating “They/Them pronouns.” However, in stark contrast, Jane reveals that their belief system significantly impacts their professional life, necessitating the concealment of this aspect of their identity. They stated:

I dislike the fact I am going back into hiding for this position. I don’t know how I am going to prepare the services for advent and Christmas, at alone all the other weekly services I will need to do.

40 Gervais et al., *Do You Believe in Atheists?* 1200.

41 Survey: Atheists face discrimination, rejection in many areas of life, by Pamela Manson. May 11, 2020. https://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2020/05/11/Survey-Atheists-face-discrimination-rejection-in-many-areas-of-life/2081589218869/. Accessed September 22, 2024.

42 American Atheists Opposes Employment Discrimination in the Name of Religion. Sep 16, 2019. <https://www.atheists.org/2019/09/departments-of-labor-religious-discrimination/>. Accessed September 22, 2024.

43 Paul Z. Meyers. Feb 5, 2009. “It must be tough to be an atheist in Texas.” <https://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2009/02/05/it-must-be-tough-to-be-an-atheist/>. Accessed September 22, 2024.

44 “‘No God’ comment adds up to no job for fired math teacher.” *USA Today*, May 29, 2010 http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2010-05-29-fired28_st_n.htm. Accessed September 22, 2024.

Mentioned above, Faraz from Pakistan contends that he has encountered employment discrimination due to his beliefs. Notably, he observes a societal tendency to accord additional respect and support to individuals who overtly manifest religious devotion. In Faraz's perspective, maintaining authenticity in his behavior becomes challenging, as he is disinclined to feign religiosity. This authenticity, he asserts, has had repercussions on his professional life, contributing to his forced resignation from at least two positions. Faraz attributes these outcomes to the perception among colleagues and workmates that he lacks genuine religious fervor, thereby complicating his professional engagements.

Another respondent, John, spent many years working as a missionary in China. However, upon returning to Canada and openly identifying as an atheist, he encountered some unease. This often resulted in confrontations and debates, leading to John being perceived by many as an enemy. He further elaborated:

I currently work as a corporate consultant, and I have had times when companies have chosen not to work with me because, when researching me on social media, they've seen that I'm an atheist, and have chosen not to hire me purely because of that. However, this has only happened a few times.

At the same time, respondents agreed that, in most cases, it is harder to identify someone's religious beliefs than it is to identify their race or gender, making the experience quite different from racial or sexual discrimination. Beliefs cannot be 'seen' in the way behavior can be. A study by Cimino and Smith states that, "no external markers or signifiers announce someone as an atheist, making it easier for atheists to avoid any social stigma by keeping their nonbelief to themselves."⁴⁵

Joey Fire Lane Deer, a spiritual leader within the Lakota-Sioux tribe, also notes that form of discrimination against atheists stands apart from other instances as it remains concealed until disclosed unlike more visible markers of identity. They state:

45 Cimino, R., and C. Smith. 2015. *Atheist Awakening: Secular Activism & Community in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 63.

It's only different from all the other experiences of discrimination I've had in that no one can see I'm an atheist when they look at me. They don't have preconceived notions until I tell them that I'm an atheist. Then, it's just like discrimination for anything else...it's ridiculous, hurtful.

Hence, as reported by Abbott and Mollen, who apply concealable stigmatized identity theory to atheists and nonbelievers, atheists frequently choose to conceal their personal religious views.⁴⁶ Certain TCP participants, particularly those in their 50s and 60s, have shared that they opt to delay revealing their nonbeliever status, at least until their retirement. For many, being a religious professional constitutes their sole career, involving special education and a lifelong commitment. Disclosing their nonbelief would entail forfeiting both the material and social support associated with their profession. Consequently, many choose to maintain silence. Many TCP participants also reported fearing ostracism and neglect even after retirement, leading them to prefer not disclosing their nonbelief to those around them.

Conclusion

The findings of this research reveal that clergy undergoing a loss of faith in supernatural assumptions encounter stigma and ostracism, particularly within their immediate family, community, and employment spheres. Consequently, some are compelled to relocate, leaving their homes, cities, and even their countries. These challenges hinder many from openly expressing their nonbelief. Fearing the prospect of social rejection and stigmatization, they often opt for a clandestine existence, concealing their true identity and living as covert apostates.

The key findings of this study are:

- 1) Prejudices against nonbelievers exist, varying based on geographical context, religious background, and surroundings. The Clergy Project participants reported

⁴⁶ Abbott, D. M., & Mollen, D. *Atheism as a concealable stigmatized identity*; see also Yeatts et al., *Development and Evaluation of the Atheist Identity Concealment Scale*.

diverse forms of discrimination, drawing parallels with biases identified in previous studies.⁴⁷ Those who come out as atheists often face ostracism and stereotypes related to anti-atheist prejudice, such as being perceived as lacking morality and being ethically inferior, thus deemed untrustworthy.

- 2) Many clergy without belief choose to conceal their stigmatized identity as a coping mechanism against discrimination. Yet, maintaining a concealed identity comes with its own set of challenges, causing significant internal discomfort and stress.⁴⁸
- 3) The findings support Dennett and LaScola's observations⁴⁹ that clergy deconversion has serious consequences for clergy, their families, and communities.
- 4) Hidden apostasy presents a challenge for scholars to identify and measure such individuals, as they remain hidden from researchers.

I must acknowledge some limitations of my findings. Although I was unable to establish any significant contrast between clergy who remain in the ministry and those who have left, many of those who have departed still conceal their nonbelieving or atheistic identities due to widespread social prejudice and stigma against nonbelievers. This finding in itself is noteworthy, but future studies could explore different angles. Specifically, future research might investigate how former parishioners or ex-believers handle anti-atheist prejudice compared to nonbelieving clergy. Additionally, examining whether there are significant gender differences in this context could provide further insights.

47 Brewster, M. E., Velez, B. L., Geiger, E. F., & Sawyer, J. S. "It's like herding cats: Atheist minority stress, group involvement, and psychological outcomes." *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 67, no. 1 (2020): 1–13; Cragun, R., B. A. Kosmin, A. Keysar, J. Hammer, and M. Nielson. "On the Receiving End: Discrimination toward the Non-religious in the United States." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27, (2012): 105–127; Hammer, J. H., Cragun, R. T., Hwang, K., & Smith, J. M. "Forms, frequency, and correlates of perceived anti-atheist discrimination." *Secularism and Nonreligion* 1, (2012): 43–67.

48 cf. Cottee, *The Apostates*; Fader, *Hidden Heretics*.

49 Dennett, Daniel and Linda LaScola, "Preachers Who Are Not Believers," *Evolutionary Psychology* 8, no.1 (2010): 122–150; Dennett, Daniel and Linda LaScola. *Caught in the Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind* (Pitchstone Publishing, 2013).

Previous studies have indicated that men are more likely than women to reject religion or identify as atheists, and that this gender gap is not primarily a result of biological differences but rather important social differences that overlap and reinforce each other.⁵⁰ Furthermore, studies consistently show that nonreligious and atheist individuals often have better social standing: they are typically well-educated, higher-income males, primarily white. In other words, these individuals are less likely to experience oppression and thus may not require the support that religion or religious communities often provide.⁵¹ Edgell et al. argue⁵² that it is social risk, rather than existential risk, that explains why non-religion, and particularly atheism, are more socially risky for women and other marginalized groups. They contend that when both men and women make socially stigmatized choices, women encounter greater risks than men for making the same choices. In other words, women are more likely to face social consequences for adopting non-religious beliefs, identities, and practices. Future studies would benefit from examining this aspect within the context of nonbelieving clergy.

The creation of organizations like The Clergy Project demonstrates a demand, evidenced by its growing membership despite a policy against active proselytization or advertising⁵³. Expanding TCP into different languages (currently existing only in English) could attract and support more nonbelieving clergy worldwide. The research findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the negative perceptions of atheists and the various forms of anti-atheist discrimination they face. It reveals that, in many parts of the world, atheists must conceal their views to avoid hostility. This study underscores that the nonbelieving population, particularly clergy, occupies a marginalized status and requires increased attention from both scholars and society.

50 Trzebiatowska, Marta, and Steve Bruce. *Why Are Women More Religious Than Men?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

51 Brewster, M. E. "Atheism, gender, and sexuality," in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. S. Bullivant and M. Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 511-524; Mahlamäki, Tiina. "Why Are Men More Likely to Be Atheists Than Women?" in *Atheism in Five Minutes*, ed. Teemu Taira (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2022), 105–108.

52 Edgell, Penny, Jacqui Frost, and Evan Stewart. "From Existential to Social Understanding of Risk: Examining Gender Differences in Nonreligion." *Social Compass* 4(6) (2017): 556– 574.

53 Zamušinski, *Understanding the Role of The Clergy Project*, 6.

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The Journal of Religion and Culture (JRC) acknowledges that our work takes place on unceded Indigenous lands. The Kanien'kehá:ka Nation is recognized as the custodians of the lands and waters on which we meet today. Tiohtià:ke, which has been settled as Montréal, has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst many First Nations, including Kanien'kehá:ka of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, Huron/Wendat, Abenaki, and Anishinaabeg. This place continues to be the home of many Indigenous peoples, as well as settlers and immigrants representing different cultures, languages, and worldviews. As uninvited guests who call this place home, we respect the continued connections with the past, present, and future in our ongoing relationships with Indigenous and other peoples within the community, and we are grateful for the opportunity to live here. We hope to honour the relational values that Indigenous peoples have centered in their connections with human and ecological worlds, and aim to centre consistent and persistent labour rooted in decolonial and antiracist practices while recognizing and working to change ongoing colonial practices of institutions of higher education.

