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Review Essay: The History of Atheism, Secularism, and Humanism: Recent Works and Future Directions

Abstract: In this review essay, the author presents and discusses current research on the history of atheism, secularism, and humanism, specifically focusing on seven recent monographs. Based on these works, he paints a picture of where this research field stands today while also offering some suggestions regarding in which direction research on this topic ought to move in the future. The author stresses that even though the research discussed spans many geographical areas and time periods, it constitutes a coherent research field. He underlines how context matters, stressing the importance of paying attention to specific religious contexts. He emphasizes the need for more English-language research on cases other than the US and the UK and the need for more comparative, entangled, and global histories. He welcomes the trend of 20th-century topics in a field dominated by earlier centuries. Finally, he points out how research on this topic could enrichen nearby fields, specifically discussing which synergies may be found in relation to the history of knowledge.

Keywords: atheism, secularism, humanism, freethought, intellectual history

Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018).

Christopher Cameron, Black *Freethinkers: A History of African American Secularism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019).

Nathan G. Alexander, *Race in a Godless World: Atheism, Race, and Civilization, 1850–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

Alec Ryrie, *Unbelievers: An Emotional History of Doubt* (London: William Collins, 2019).

Kimberly A. Hamlin, *Free Thinker: Sex, Suffrage, and the Extraordinary Life of Helen Hamilton Gardener* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020).

Stephen P. Weldon, *The Scientific Spirit of American Humanism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020).

Charles Devellennes, *Positive Atheism: Bayle, Meslier, d'Holbach, Diderot* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

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Introduction

The return of religion, de-secularization, the post-secular turn, or the new visibility of religion – there were many concepts seeking to grapple with one of the most dynamic phenomena in scholarship and in society at large at the end of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st. This concerns the notion that religion – after a modernist phase of being relatively marginalized – was returning to the very center of both international and domestic politics, as well as in cultural and intellectual debates inside and outside of academia. This triggered a heated debate on the validity of secularization theory/narratives, a rethinking of intellectual-historical scholarship, and not least a discussion and critique of secularism initiated by authors from various academic fields, such as Talal Asad, José Casanova, Joan Scott, and Charles Taylor, to name a few.[1]

This essay considers one element of the wider recent and renewed intellectual interest in understanding religion and its boundaries: namely the growing body of historical research considering individuals and institutions having consciously and explicitly turned away from a belief in God or gods and organized religion, thereby trying to formulate the possibilities of living in and organizing societies without a belief in God. This research is sometimes linked to the scholarship on secularism and secularization mentioned above – sometimes drawing inspiration from it, sometimes criticizing it – but is nevertheless broad enough to make out a corner of its own, a specific research field in which scholars of different national and his-

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1 Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); Joan Wallach Scott, *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). For discussions on secularization and de-secularization, see, for instance, Rodney Stark, "Secularization, R.I.P," *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999); Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). For a discussion on the return of religion and scholarship in intellectual history, see, for instance, Alister Chapman, John Coffey, and Brad S. Gregory, ed., *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).

torical contexts communicate with one another.[2] The phenomenon studied – the turning away from, or absence of, a belief in God or gods – is often labeled atheism. While this is the most common umbrella term, a certain conceptual complexity exists, which I return to below.

Moreover, there are interesting points of contact in relation to the burgeoning field of history of knowledge, which is promoted in this yearbook. For many historical atheists, "knowledge" represented an important concept opposite to religious belief. More specifically, modern science and scientific knowledge have played an important role for many of the individuals and communities that consciously turned away from organized religion, both during the freethought movement of the 19th century and our more contemporary atheism of the 21st century. While the history of knowledge has addressed many issues and topics, religion and detractors of religion have not been prominent topics in the field, meaning that there are possibilities for further work where the link of these two fields could create synergies.[3]

Intellectual historian Nathan Alexander points out in a recent text on the historiography of atheism that the "topic has frequently attracted partisans on either side."[4] That is, much of historical interpretations of unbelief have adopted either an atheist or secularist perspective or a decidedly Christian one. The fact that the history of various subjects attracts scholars who also have a stake in them personally is obviously common and is not necessarily a problem. At times, however, such historiography risks tipping over to become more of identity politics than high-quality scholarship. Secularist *Heilsgeschichten* on how at least the Western world has shaken off the religious burden of less developed eras have been common, as have, conversely, narratives regarding the destructive decline of Christianity or the perils of a world without God. These were more common in the 19th century, but as shown by Alexander, there are echoes of them also later, even in our own era.

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2 An institutional manifestation of this is the International Society for Historians of Atheism, Secularism, and Humanism (ISHASH), which hosts webinars and conferences, among other things. See https://atheismsecularismhumanism.wordpress.com/ , accessed May 31, 2023.

3 On religion and the history of knowledge, see the discussion by Kajsa Brilkman and Anna Nilsson Hammar, "Religion as Knowledge," https://newhistoryofknowledge.com/2019/04/24/religion-as-knowledge/, accessed May 31, 2023. For a discussion on the importance of religion in the field of history of knowledge with a focus on interdisciplinarity, see Simon Goldhill, "How Interdisciplinary Is God?" *KNOW: A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge* 1, no. 1 (2017).

4 Nathan G. Alexander, "Histories of Atheism: Key Questions and Disputes," in *The Cambridge History of Atheism*, ed. Michael Ruse and Stephen Bullivant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 14.

Two books that came out in 2014 may bear witness to this. Mitchell Stephens, a historian and professor of journalism published a history of atheism titled *Imagine There's no Heaven: How Atheism Helped Create the Modern World.* The title gives away its somewhat simplified narrative: from ancient times up until today, there has been a more or less dichotomous struggle between brave disbelievers, who have stood for good and modern things – science, reason, individualism, tolerance, etc. – and narrow-minded and reactionary religious people. Atheists and doubters were the ones who "helped lead the way to the modern world."[5] Another overview of the history of atheism, with a similarly ingenious title, is Nick Spencer's *Atheists: The Origin of the Species.* Spencer works at the Christian think tank Theos and may thus be considered a representative of the camp opposite from that of Stephens. Indeed, what Spencer takes issue with in his introduction is what he refers to as the "creation myth" of atheism – simplistic accounts of how reason and science triumphed over superstitious religion. Spencer's way of countering this is to offer a more complex story, in which modern atheism rather had to do with the "(ab)use of theologically legitimized political authority than with developments in science and philosophy."[6] While *Atheists* is quite nuanced, it clearly represents a historiography in the service of contemporary religious debates. In fact, Spencer ends it by levelling critique at the so-called New Atheists, who were influential at the beginning of the 21st century.[7]

Whatever you think about New Atheism, it seems as if it has contributed to the growth of the field of the history of atheism, secularism, and humanism. Works like the ones just mentioned relate to this movement quite explicitly, but it is plausible to assume that the wave of New Atheism, together with the above-mentioned discussions on the "return of religion" and the "postsecular," was instrumental in also bringing forth a more profound historical scholarship on the topics of atheism and related issues. One example is another book from 2014, intellectual historian Todd Weir's *Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Germany: The Rise of the Fourth Confession*, which departs from contemporary discussions regarding secularism, such as the work of Talal Asad. However, in contrast to the more sweeping narratives of Stephens and Spencer, this work marked a high standard

5 Mitchell Stephens, *Imagine There's No Heaven: How Atheism Helped Create the Modern World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 2.

6 Nick Spencer, *Atheists: The Origin of the Species* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), xv.

7 Spencer, *Atheists*, 247–257. New Atheism was coined as a term to describe a new wave of writers, scientists, and philosophers propagating atheism. The most famous exponents were Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett.

in the writing of a more contextualist case study of a specific society, influenced by both intellectual and social history.[8]

Weir has not been alone in carrying out new studies of great quality. Overall, the 2010s and the 2020s have so far been a highly productive period for the historiography of atheism, secularism, humanism, and freethought, a period crowned by the magisterial new *Cambridge History of Atheism* published in late 2021. This new standard work, edited by philosopher of science Michael Ruse and theologian and sociologist Stephen Bullivant, contains 60 chapters over some 1,200 pages in two volumes (including texts by Weir and four of the authors whose works I discuss here). While having a historical perspective, stretching from antiquity to our own time, it includes scholars from various disciplines and offers both thematic and geographical overviews, as well as tackling contemporary issues and topics such as transhumanism and the internet. This two-volume work, impressive in terms of its breadth and up-to-date character, however, is for various reasons left outside this essay.[9] Instead, I present a selection of recent monographs to paint a picture of how the history of atheism and related phenomena is written at the moment.

In selecting these works, a few criteria were taken into consideration. They had to be recent and are all published in the last five years. Although I wanted them to be representative of the trends in English-language research on this topic, I also wanted to include topics not addressing the dominant cases of the US and the UK. This means that a few books on these national contexts were left out.[10] However, the ones included offer a good picture of how research is car-

8 Todd H. Weir, *Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Germany: The Rise of the Fourth Confession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014). He was not alone in the first half of the 2010s, see also Laura Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism: Secularism, Religion and Women's Emancipation, England 1830–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

9 One reason is its sheer size, another is that I focus on monographs, while a third is that I have co-authored a chapter. Apart from Todd Weir, Nathan Alexander, Christopher Cameron, Alec Ryrie, and Victoria Smolkin also contribute with chapters related to their respective field of expertise. Michael Ruse and Stephen Bullivant, ed., *The Cambridge History of Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). For an introductory review, see Clare Stainthorp, "Book Review: The Cambridge History of Atheism," *Global Intellectual History*, published online, 2022.

10 A few more recent works that did not make it here, either because of the predominance of Anglo-American works or because they were published a bit too late in the writing process include James Bryant Reeves, *Godless Fictions in the Eighteenth Century: A Literary History of Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Matthew Wilson, *Richard Congreve, Positivist Politics, the Victorian Press, and the British Empire* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *The Church of Saint Thomas Paine: A Religious History of American Secularism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021); Patrick J. Corbeil, *Empire and Progress in the Victorian Secularist Movement: Imagining a Secular World* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022); Suzanne Hobson, *Unbe-*

ried out at the moment, while also featuring a selection of specific angles, topics, and time periods, thereby highlighting a breadth of approaches. While a few highly interesting edited volumes have been published recently, I have here prioritized monographs since these represent more coherent projects.[11]

I have already used many terms for the object of this research field. This might constitute a drawback but is almost unavoidable. Concepts such as atheism, secularism, humanism, freethought, unbelief, nonbelief, disbelief, doubt, and irreligion are not all synonymous but are nevertheless sufficiently related to make out a historical phenomenon to be studied. Sociologists may decide on "non-religion" as an analytical concept and be content with that, while historians make different choices depending on their tradition and the specific case they study. Quite frequently, they use these terms more or less synonymously.[12] Still, one might ask

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lief in Interwar Literary Culture: Doubting Moderns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); Renny Thomas, *Science and Religion in India: Beyond Disenchantment* (London: Routledge, 2022); Callum G. Brown, David Nash and Charlie Lynch, *The Humanist Movement in Modern Britain: A History of Ethicists, Rationalists and Humanists* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023). Schmidt's previous book also needs mentioning as an important study from the last decade: Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Village Atheists: How America's Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016). Looking beyond works in English, there are a few solid German monographs from the last ten years: Lisa Dittrich, *Antiklerikalismus in Europa: Öffentlichkeit und Säkularisierung in Frankreich, Spanien und Deutschland (1848–1914)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014); Christoffer Leber, *Arbeit am Welträtsel: Religion und Säkularität in der Monismusbewegung um 1900* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020); Claus Spenninger, *Stoff für Konflikt: Fortschrittsdenken und Religionskritik im naturwissenschaftlichen Materialismus des 19. Jahrhunderts, 1847–1881* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021).

11 Niels De Nutte and Bert Gasenbeek, ed., *Looking Back to Look Forward: Organised Humanism in the World: Belgium, Great Britain, the Netherlands and the United States of America, 1945–2005* (Brussels: VUB Press, 2019); Carolin Kosuch, ed., *Freethinkers in Europe: National and Transnational Secularities, 1789–1920s* (Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter, 2020); Tomás Bubík, Atko Remmel, and David Václavík, ed., *Freethought and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe: The Development of Secularity and Non-religion* (London: Routledge, 2020); Jenny Vorpahl and Dirk Schuster, ed., *Communicating Religion and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe* (Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter, 2020). In other languages, see, for instance, Patrice Dartevelle and Christophe de Spiegeleer, ed., *Histoire de l'athéisme en Belgique* (Brussels: Aba éditions, 2021); Ellen van Impe and Rik Röttger, *50 jaar debat & verbinding: De Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen en haar leden 1971–2021* (Brussels: ASP, 2023), both of which focus on Belgium.

12 For instance, Nathan Alexander in his book discussed below states that "I use the terms 'atheism,' 'freethought,' 'nonbelief,' and 'irreligion' interchangeably." Nathan G. Alexander, *Race in a Godless World: Atheism, Race, and Civilization, 1850–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 13. For a discussion on the term non-religion from a sociological perspective, see Lois Lee, *Recognizing the Non-religious: Reimagining the Secular* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), especially Chapter 1.

whether all the phenomena included here could be said to be related or whether it is not too much of a stretch to include, say, 16th-century blasphemy, 19th-century freethought worldviews and popular movements, and 20th-century communist state atheism in the same discussion. One of the points I make toward the end of this text is that they are sufficiently related and that scholars of a particular time and place may learn much from research on other contexts.

A further point I make is what I hinted at already at the outset: that scholars should be careful not to write partisan histories and that atheism is not an eternally homogenous phenomenon, but that social and political contexts play a key role in which form it takes. This leads me to another point, which is that attentiveness to religious contexts is key also for historians of atheism. A noticeable and positive trend is that quite a few of the monographs discussed here move into the 20th century. I want to point out the importance of continuing this trend as earlier centuries have been dominant in the field. Further, the field is dominated by research on the US and the UK. While the scholarship on these contexts is great and possible to learn from, I would like to stress that understanding atheism as a global phenomenon would be richer with more perspectives both from other parts of the Christian West and from other parts of the world, Christian and non-Christian. More comparative, entangled, and global histories are thus called for. Finally, I would like to encourage historians of atheism, secularism, and humanism to ask what their research can bring to other fields and topics and to reflect upon what we can bring to historiography in general. Specifically, I also try to point out how this research does and could further relate to the field of the history of knowledge.

All these points and suggestions for future directions are discussed further in the concluding part. Before we get to this part, I discuss seven recent books, somewhat grouped geographically, starting with three works dealing with the United States, followed by moving across the Atlantic to a number of transnational and European studies. Apart from discussing the contents of these books, I also want to highlight methodology, materials, what they bring to the field, and how they relate to each other.

US History in Focus

Increasingly looking upon history through the lens of racial relations has been a noticeable development in recent years, especially in the United States, undoubtedly related to current events. In the field of the history of atheism and secularism, two books written by intellectual historians do this in different ways. Nathan Alexander, mentioned at the outset, has written a book about the history of race and racism, which I come back to in the next section, while Christopher Cameron

focuses on secularism in the history of African American political and intellectual life.

Cameron presents a clear and straightforward argument in his exciting *Black Freethinkers: A History of African American Secularism.* Contrary to common depictions of African American communities and traditions as being especially religious, yes, even "naturally religious," freethought and atheism have played a key role in black political and intellectual life since the 19th century.[13] Another prejudice that does not hold is that atheism has often been – in the words of a 19th-century slaveholder referred to by Cameron – the preserve of "educated and cultivated minds" – that is, white people.[14] In a sense, Cameron also argues against the narrative on how reason and science represented the primary source of non-belief in modern society by claiming that in the long run, the brutal experience and legacy of slavery resulted in a loss of faith for many African Americans.

The argument directly relating to slavery is naturally more prominent in the first of four chapters in this chronologically structured book: a chapter discussing slavery and the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, when slavery was still a very prevalent argument. The following chapters focus on the Harlem renaissance, radical left-wing politics of the interwar era, and the civil rights movement, respectively. In a concluding afterword, Cameron touches upon a few contemporary black freethought organizations and individuals. The structure of Cameron's narrative is in this sense tied to the general development of modern African American history. While it outlines this broad narrative, Cameron's method in many ways concerns focusing on specific individuals. From Frederick Douglass to Alice Walker, we get short narratives on a diverse set of characters with different backgrounds, ideals, and expressions, who nevertheless had one thing in common in that they were "black freethinkers." Here, Cameron analyzes different sorts of material: speeches and various theoretical and political writings, but also novels and autobiographies.

One interesting theme throughout the book is that Cameron spends a fair amount of time on retelling why these people left a religion they typically grew up very close to. As mentioned above, slavery was one reason for abandoning religion. Frederick Douglass experienced violence from a white Christian farmer he worked for, which led him to a feeling of "cosmic abandonment and self-reliance."[15] Later black freethinkers did not have this direct experience of slavery, and there were also other reasons for leaving one's religion. Sometimes, it could be quite simple, such as having been included and received education in free-

13 Christopher Cameron, *Black Freethinkers: A History of African American Secularism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019), x.

14 Cameron, *Black Freethinkers*, ix. See also p. xii.

15 Cameron, *Black Freethinkers*, 27.

thought circles, which was the case when Alain Locke encountered Felix Adler's Ethical Culture Society.[16] The gravitation toward atheism could also be the result of studying existentialist philosophers (Huey Newton) or communist theoreticians (Stokely Carmichael).[17] Many black freethinkers told stories about how they at a formative age lost their faith after they had experienced hypocrisy and immorality in Christianity, either in relation to racial hierarchies in a Christian United States (James Baldwin) or within the African American community (Richard Wright).[18]

Such personal stories – or "freethought conversion narratives" as Cameron terms them – in themselves represent a form of secularist speech act, in that they were often publicly expressed in a stylized fashion.[19] Cameron points out that what childhood story novelist Richard Wright related in his autobiography *Black Boy* – about a greedy preacher who took the best parts of the chicken in front of hungry children – is almost a literary trope, a part of African American lore.[20] Apart from autobiographies, Cameron also analyzes other literary works. In his words, Nella Larsen's novel *Quicksand* is "probably the most extensive exploration of religious skepticism in African American literature before 1930."[21] While fiction is a different form of source material from argumentative or theoretical texts, as a genre, it is no less important in terms of conveying secularist messages. At a time when women were more seldom than men elevated to the highest positions as leaders and ideologues, they instead found other channels to communicate their ideas, such as writing fiction. Novels may thus serve as a genre in which to find voices other than those of the most famous male theoreticians. Thus, while it sometimes feels as if many individuals and various materials are included in Cameron's compact book, there are good reasons for doing so. *Black Freethinkers* is a rich work that adds something important to the study of the history of atheism.

In terms of the focus on individuals, there are affinities to the latest book by historian Kimberly A. Hamlin, a biography of Helen Hamilton Gardener (1853–1925, born Alice Chenoweth). Gardener was a champion of women's rights throughout her life. She was a writer, a novelist, but primarily an activist for various causes having to do with sex, science, and politics; for instance, campaigning for raising the legal age of consent for women (girls). In the 20th century, she was involved in

16 Cameron, *Black Freethinkers*, 47–48.
17 Cameron, *Black Freethinkers*, 129–136.
18 Cameron, *Black Freethinkers*, 56–57, 154–155.
19 Cameron, *Black Freethinkers*, 46.
20 Cameron, *Black Freethinkers*, 56–57.
21 Cameron, *Black Freethinkers*, 75.

the suffrage movement and a key player in the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment. The political establishment recognized Gardener's work, and she received a seat on the Civil Service Commission in 1920, making her the highest-ranking and highest-paid woman in the federal government.

Gardener was a "free thinker," as stated in the title of the book, but she was also a freethinker in the narrower sense more relevant to this essay. The freethought movement in the latter half of the 19th century was her passageway into public life. In her late twenties, Gardener had read John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Thomas Paine, and freethought periodicals, starting to formulate her own texts, often related to sex and gender roles. She shared these with the "Great Agnostic" Robert Ingersoll, a famous freethought orator and later the leader of the American Secular Union.[22] Ingersoll encouraged Gardener to continue writing and in 1884 invited her to speak at a public meeting in New York. Her lecture "Men, Women and Gods," in which she lambasted the creation story in Genesis, was not only a success that night but quickly earned her a reputation and gave her a prominent role in the freethought speaking circuit. She was touring eastern United States in 1884, started publishing in the freethought paper *Truth Seeker*, and worked as an editor in *Freethinkers' Magazine*/*Free Thought Magazine*. This was not without frictions: some questioned the quick rise of "Ingersoll's favorite," and Gardener argued with another freethought leader, Samuel Putnam, regarding his view on women. For a short while, however, Gardener had an important position in the freethought movement, hailed as "Ingersoll in soprano."[23]

Hamlin's biography of Gardener is not only an impressive empirical achievement but also a great read. While it is not only a work primarily focusing on the history of atheism and freethought, it also demonstrates the viability of biography as a method in this field. Gardener was a life-long agnostic and critic of Christianity, but in a sense, this was not what brought her to the freethought movement. Hamlin points out that in the late 1870s, freethinkers were more or less "the only people openly talking and writing about marriage and sex," and "rationally discussing the restrictions of patriarchal marriage and the sexual double standard."[24] Gardener's primary loyalty was to the women's cause and not to critique Christianity for its own sake, something that her public polemics with Putnam made clear.[25] This also meant that she later moved on, focusing her work on the *National American Woman Suffrage Association*.

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22 Kimberly A. Hamlin, *Free Thinker: Sex, Suffrage, and the Extraordinary Life of Helen Hamilton Gardener* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020), 52–54, 61–62.

23 Hamlin, *Free Thinker*, 67–82, 144.

24 Hamlin, *Free Thinker*, 54.

25 Hamlin, *Free Thinker*, 75–76.

Focusing on a single individual may thus tell us something about the broader conjunctures of the freethought movement: the other political and social causes it related to, what made it attractive to certain segments of the population, and how this changed over time. Biographies of long-time leaders who spent their entire life in the movement are important, but biographies of other individuals who may have come and gone, such as Gardener, also offer an interesting diachronic perspective placing freethought into the broader workings of the history of politics, society, and knowledge. As it were, Gardener entered freethought as it experienced its "golden age," when the movement served as an important vehicle for various sorts of radical opinion formation. For her, this intellectually and politically radical milieu became a springboard into other engagements.

In a sense, Hamlin's work can be read together with – as a complement to – another recent monograph on US history of freethought in a broad sense. While devoting a couple of chapters to the 19th century, Stephen Weldon's *The Scientific Spirit of American Humanism* mainly focuses on the 20th century and another stream of the breaking loose from the Christian tradition. Weldon's story is a history of (secular) humanism, to some extent focusing on the American Humanist Association (AHA), but by no means exclusively on this organization. It is interesting to note that neither Gardener, Ingersoll, nor Putnam figure in Weldon's work, and it is clear that the roots of the tradition he portrays were different. There were ties to the Ethical Culture Society, but in many ways, humanism rather grew out of Unitarianism and liberal and unorthodox interpretations of Christianity and not out of the 19th-century freethought movement, as represented by figures such as Ingersoll et al.

In his history, Weldon not only writes a commendable history of secular humanism in the United States, which will be useful for a long time to come, but also addresses a few issues that might be of wider interest. First, as the title makes clear, science plays a structuring role in the book. Science and religion are still seen by many as eternal opponents. Historians of science and ideas have debunked this simplified dichotomy – the "conflict thesis" – for a long time now, but while there might not be an eternal battle, it is clear that science and scientific knowledge have been invoked as a tool or weapon in debates on the validity and position of Christianity in society, not least during the last 150 years.[26] Therefore, nuanced empirical studies on this changing and multi-faceted relation, such as Weldon's, are valuable.

26 John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago: The Univer-

As expected, there is plenty of evolution and creationism in *The Scientific Spirit*, as the struggle over primarily the teaching of evolution has been a "persistent aspect" of modern US culture and an issue having engaged famous humanists.[27] But the most important takeaway from this work is that while science has been an ideal throughout the history of 20th-century humanism, its appearances and ideals have varied. In a kind of ideal type distinction, Weldon outlines two poles: one where science is more holistic, even spiritual, linked to values such as democracy, equality, and faith in the goodness, freedom, and dignity of man. On the other side, there has been a more reductionist, mechanistic, and deterministic view of science, in this version perceived as a value-neutral endeavor. If the first was linked to pragmatist philosophy dominating the humanist movement in the first half of the 20th century, the second was rather related to positivism and an Anglo-American analytic tradition of philosophy. These different ideals could come into conflict, which became clear in, for instance, humanist debates regarding eugenics and behavioristic psychology.[28]

This dichotomy is in many ways related to another question having occupied the humanists themselves as well as observers: is humanism "religious" or not? It certainly was for most people at the beginning of the movement. They viewed humanism as a religion of a new, higher sort, freed from superstition and transcendence and placed within a naturalistic worldview. This position was close to that of the large number of Unitarian ministers who developed the movement early on but also to a pragmatist philosopher such as John Dewey. In his *A Common Faith* from 1934, he wrote about how religious intensity and experience were deeply human but did not have anything to do with God.[29] Positions like these became less dominant throughout the years. As Weldon concludes, the humanist movement "began as a radical religion and gradually secularized. It started with a largely pragmatist worldview and became more positivist in outlook later."[30] Whether or not humanism was a religion was not only a theoretical question but could also involve highly practical concerns: the categorization as a religious organization is linked to highly tangible things such as taxation and conscientious objection.[31]

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sity of Chicago Press, 2015); Thomas Dixon and Adam. R. Shapiro, *Science and Religion: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

27 Stephen P. Weldon, *The Scientific Spirit of American Humanism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 191–208.

28 Weldon, *The Scientific Spirit*, 3–4, 117–129, 148–149.

29 Weldon, *The Scientific Spirit*, 6, 71.

30 Weldon, *The Scientific Spirit*, 214.

31 Weldon, *The Scientific Spirit*, 176.

Weldon succeeds in his aim to connect humanism to the wider religious and intellectual history of the United States. He tells the story in episodes or thematic chapters, which are well-connected to one another. One theme he discusses, and which is interesting to relate to Cameron's work, is the question of race. Weldon shows how humanism was very much a preserve of the white, well-to-do middle class. While most of the time being progressive with regard to race, the humanist movement with its strong emphasis on science was not particularly attractive to African American nonbelievers and freethinkers, who came to their convictions based on different concerns. The challenges of a racist society "made many of the debates about science and religion almost superfluous to them," as Weldon puts it.[32]

The three books discussed so far present three different angles on the turning away from Christianity in the modern United States and together present a rich history of this process. An additional piece of the puzzle in this development is the book we now move on to discuss.

Traveling across the Atlantic

Stephen Weldon touches upon the question of race in his work on science and humanism. The relationship between science and race also plays an important role in the already mentioned monograph by Nathan Alexander. Alexander's work relates to the ones we have discussed thus far, but he adopts a broader geographical perspective. Rightly pointing out that the freethought movement in the 19th century was transatlantic, he includes both the United States and Britain in his *Race in a Godless World: Atheism, Race, and Civilization, 1850–1914.* The point of departure of this book is a debate at the intersection between religious identity, morality, and history: what is the link between secularization and racism? Did the formation of more secular societies starting in the late 19th century help open the way for racism or did it provide new ways of challenging it? The first position is often based on the idea that God created humankind as one, in the image of God, and when this diminished as a governing social idea, new ways opened up in terms of creating racial hierarchies and even dehumanizing certain people, frequently with support from supposedly value-free science. The second position points to how Christians have often used their faith to defend racial hierarchies and oppression, such

32 Weldon, *The Scientific Spirit*, 223, see also 127–129.

as slavery, that there is a strong tradition of Christian anti-Semitism, and that secularization, as a result, rather was a boon in the fight against racism.[33]

Alexander claims that while versions of these positions are often found in debates on modern atheism and the secular, this has never been systematically researched in relation to actual freethinkers, who were pushing for society to secularize. He here chooses to focus on the late 19th century up until the beginning of the 20th century based on two reasons. First, this was a period when racial attitudes were very prominent on both sides of the Atlantic. This was not only an age of British imperialism – as well as abolitionism, civil war, and the introduction of the Jim Crow laws in the US – Alexander focuses also on how racial science grew strong during this period. Second, as mentioned above with regard to Hamlin's work, this was the golden age of freethought, when organizations, journals, and individual activists emerged in large numbers.

These freethinkers make up the source material for Alexander's study. Periodicals in focus here include the American *Boston Investigator* and *Truth Seeker* and the British *Reasoner*, *National Reformer*, and *Freethinker*, in addition to numerous other works by freethinkers and atheists such as Robert Ingersoll, W. E. B. Du Bois, George Holyoake, Annie Besant, and Charles Bradlaugh. Using this material, Alexander carries out a number of thematic case studies: on evolution, on the anthropological debate on polygenesis and monogenesis, on ideas of civilization and savagery, on the view of the Far East, and more. Alexander then uses these cases to discuss the broader question concerning secularization, secularism, and racism.

Alexander shows that there is no easy either-or answer to this question. Or, as he concludes toward the end, "The central theme of this book has been ambivalence."[34] As discussed above, many white freethinkers had radical political ideas, including abolitionism and anti-racism. Here, Robert Ingersoll again deserves mention, as he argued against prejudice and for equal civil rights for African Americans, while also protesting against slavery and lynching.[35] And the freethinkers' position as outsiders with regard to the Christian establishment could mean that they took on more sympathetic views than others toward "other races," both "savages" in Africa and the "wise men of the East," who were sometimes presented as having more advanced religious views than the superstitious Christians of the West. This, however, does not mean that there were no negative stereotypes of non-white people among freethinkers. There were also quite clear cases of promot-

33 This argument reverberates throughout the book but is neatly summed up at the outset: Alexander, *Race in a Godless World*, 1–2.

34 Alexander, *Race in a Godless World*, 205.

35 Alexander, *Race in a Godless World*, 157–166, 173.

ing racial hierarchies and outright and vile racism, such as when the *Truth Seeker* editor Eugene MacDonald in 1903 compared black men to animals and described people of African descent as an "inferior race."[36]

The question posited about racism and the secular society is strongly dichotomous, and it is thus no surprise that the answer is that things are more complicated than that. Furthermore, studying freethinkers in the long 19th century only represents one piece of the larger puzzle. This does not mean that Alexander's work is not worthwhile. *Race in a Godless World* offers a great deal of empirical historical flesh to a potentially controversial question, which otherwise risks being simplified. He also offers a very rich material and in many ways presents not only a fascinating glimpse into complex racial discussions in the late 19th century but also a wonderful, updated overview of the movement and the intellectual history of freethought in general. In a concluding chapter, Alexander also moves the question further into the 20th century and into our own age. There are parallels but also massive differences. Above all, he notes how nonbelievers in the 19th century and today differ a great deal in their relations to established society, as they have now moved into the mainstream, even in the United States. This consideration of social position is something any scholar of this topic needs to take seriously.

Going back further in history, but still traversing national boundaries, is Alec Ryrie's *Unbelievers: An Emotional History of Doubt.* Ryrie is a British professor of the history of Christianity as well as a professor of divinity. As he "in the interest of full disclosure" states in his introduction, he is also a religious believer and a lay minister in the Church of England.[37] If there are two camps, as discussed in the introduction, Ryrie clearly falls into the Christian one. This, however, is no work of Christian lament regarding the decay and decadence of a godless world. If Ryrie's Christian background shows up here, it is mostly in his focus and expertise. *Unbelievers* is in a sense a church history of atheism, focusing on doubt in the early-modern Christian community (primarily but not exclusively in England). Doubt has always been part of Christianity, and in the period covered by Ryrie, it always bordered on, and sometimes fell into, sheer unbelief.

Ryrie states that "anxious doubters were not bold pioneers of freethought. If they were atheists, they were reluctant, even horrified ones."[38] This captures a few of Ryrie's points. According to this perspective, unbelief is not a *Heilsgeschichte* in which bold men and women in a clearly defined camp throughout history fight

36 Alexander, *Race in a Godless World*, 171. Regarding hierarchies, see, for instance, 66–82.
37 Alec Ryrie, *Unbelievers: An Emotional History of Doubt* (London: William Collins, 2019), 11.
38 Ryrie, *Unbelievers*, 127.

against another clearly defined team. It is rather something emerging slowly in complex, sometimes unexpected ways. In this sense, his book is related to Nick Spencer's *Atheists.* Further, "anxious" is a key word here, as Ryrie promises "an emotional history of doubt." His opening chapter takes a stand against writing the history of doubt, atheism, and by extension, secularization, as a purely intellectual history. Before there were clear and well-formulated systems of atheism, which emerged toward the later parts of the 17th century, there was blasphemy, doubt, and unbelief – the latter being entangled with, or fueled by, strong emotions. In the early modern period he focuses on, he discerns two specific types of emotional unbelief: the unbelief of anger, which concerned grudges against the church and clerics, against a Christian society, or even against God. The unbelief of anxiety was one in which pious women and men found themselves beset by fears and uncertainties that they could not reason away.[39]

All in all, Ryrie's take on doubt, unbelief, and, by extension, atheism is one of a dialectic departing from within Christianity. It seems, he argues, that it was frequently the ones who initially took Christianity the most seriously who ended up being disappointed with it, or even abandoning it. People noticed moral inconsistencies or intellectual uncertainties regarding the truth of Christianity and their own salvation. And, if Christianity did not live up to high standards of ethical and ontological certainty – perhaps it was not anything to count on at all?

Ryrie's book is more toward the broader, essayistic end of the spectrum, covering a lot of time and space rather than representing archive-based research on a single case, like most other works discussed here. It is, however, an erudite, interesting, and commendable read. His model of the emotional history of doubt is not always clearly and consistently put to work; above all, "anger" disappears somewhat in the early part supposed to focus on this very theme. Here, the book ironically reads rather like a classical history of ideas, discussing the intellectual influences of Renaissance humanism and the Protestant Reformation as well as the religious thoughts and doubts of household names in the intellectual history canon such as Machiavelli and Montaigne (Spinoza and Hobbes turn up toward the end of the book).[40] However, his general points are interesting, and I certainly see how his categories are valuable for understanding unbelief and that they may be transposed to other times and locations. Much of the conversion narratives described by black freethinkers in the 19th and 20th centuries that we encounter in Christopher Cameron's work, for instance, are certainly bound up in emotions, not least feelings of disappointment and anger toward a hypocritical Christianity.

39 Ryrie, *Unbelievers*, 5–6, 181–182.

40 Ryrie, *Unbelievers*, 35–39, 61–65, 71–72, 175–180.

A key argument of *Unbelievers* is that doubt and unbelief existed before there were elaborated philosophical arguments and systematic ideas concerning atheism. Ryrie's story ends in the late 17th century as this was the time when unbelief "came out into the open and claimed philosophical respectability for itself" – the intellectual history of atheism followed from then on.[41] The early phase of that intellectual history is covered in another recent book on atheism, Charles Devellennes' *Positive Atheism: Bayle, Meslier, D'Holbach, Diderot.* Devellennes pinpoints the birth of more systematic positive framings of atheism at about the same time as the previous author, the late 17th century, and states that this represents the natural starting point for writing the history of this topic. While Devellennes does not deny that atheism has a prehistory of unorthodox religious speculation and doubt, or that the concept of atheism existed as an accusation for a long time, he claims that it makes more sense to write a history of atheism focusing on its explicit positive versions, "if one is concerned with taking atheism seriously."[42] In a sense, this position does not correspond with that of Ryrie, but Ryrie is not the writer he argues with here, rather taking issue with previous historiographers of atheism, such as Michael Buckley and Charles Kors.

Devellennes focuses on what he refers to as the move from negative to positive atheism. Negative atheism could mean both an accusation, a label imposed on others, but also the mere denial of the gods or religious system it questions. Devellennes, however, directs his interest to the moment when atheism becomes positive; that is, in two different formulations: "seeks to set philosophical bases for a life without god" or "bringing together a coherent worldview without gods."[43] Based on this, Devellennes moves into an exegesis of the thoughts of four more or less well-known Enlightenment figures: Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), Jean Meslier (1664–1729), Baron d'Holbach (1723–1789), and Denis Diderot (1713–1784).

The point of Devellennes is not that all these thinkers were necessarily atheists in that we can be sure they did not believe in God or that they clearly identified themselves as such. No, he rather claims that neither Bayle nor Diderot were atheists in a simple sense, contrary to what some scholars have argued.[44] When it comes to Baron d'Holbach and Jean Meslier, a Catholic priest who denied God and is sometimes called the first self-avowed atheist in history, things are different – they were more clearly atheists. However, what matters here is not exactly how they explicitly identified themselves, nor what they personally believed in terms of

41 Ryrie, *Unbelievers*, 181.

42 Charles Devellennes, *Positive Atheism: Bayle, Meslier, d'Holbach, Diderot* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 3.

43 Devellennes, *Positive Atheism*, 12, 189.

44 Devellennes, *Positive Atheism*, 34–39, 56–62.

the existence of God, but that they all framed atheism as a positive system of thought. While Devellennes argues that Bayle himself was a religious believer, he points out the importance of how Bayle still made the case for the existence of virtuous atheism – yes, how an atheist society could be just as virtuous as any other.[45]

Devellennes shows that he possesses detailed knowledge of the lives and works of these four thinkers, and his presentation of the religious, social, and political thoughts of these *philosophes* is highly instructive and makes this an important study. This applies to the single chapters (Meslier, above all, has not been covered to a great extent in English-language scholarship) as well as to the comparison between them, which highlights the lively philosophical and political era of Enlightenment France. This is obviously an era that continually needs to be discussed and (re)interpreted in the intellectual history of atheism.

A discussion partner for Devellennes throughout *Positive Atheism* is intellectual historian Jonathan Israel, who is one of the leading and most productive scholars of the Age of Enlightenment in our century. Devellennes to some extent draws on Israel, but also points out that 18th-century France was more complex compared to Israel's division into moderates and radicals.[46] Still, Devellennes keeps the idea of radicalism but tries to complicate Israel's points. This is not entirely to the book's advantage, since when pointing out that radicalism can be seen in at least four different ways, and then using this term throughout the book to point out how the four thinkers were "radical" in different ways, it loses some of its power as an analytical concept. Radicalism thus ends up meaning many different things, and I am not entirely convinced that this wide concept of radicalism then serves as an important framework for historically understanding these authors in their context, certainly not as a group. The reason, as Devellennes himself points out, is that there are clear differences in their thinking.

Devellennes, who is not solely an intellectual historian but also a political theorist, toward the end of the book looks up from the 18th century and discusses possible lessons from the philosophy he has presented. In Diderot, he finds an inclination that he terms metatheism, something he claims also goes beyond positive atheism. This is a position that transcends a sharp division of belief and non-belief,

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45 Devellennes, *Positive Atheism*, 39–42.

46 It is not possible here to further analyze Jonathan Israel's discussion on these thinkers or the Enlightenment and belief. However, for an interesting recent publication by Israel on Pierre Bayle's fideism and skepticism, see Jonathan Israel, "Pierre Bayle's Correspondence and Its Significance for the History of Ideas," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 80, no. 3 (2019). For a critical view of Israel's work, above all his dichotomous view of a radical and moderate Enlightenment, see Samuel Moyn, "Mind the Enlightenment," *The Nation*, May 12, 2010.

is skeptical with regard to its own positions and assertions, and is not afraid to discuss a spiritual understanding of the world.[47] If Ryrie wrote from a humble, Christian perspective, Devellennes' work is then one of humble, atheist thinking.

While all the books covered here have strong merits and in different ways bring something lasting to the field of the history of atheism, secularism, and humanism, the last work I comment on stands out as arguably being the strongest and most important work in this field in recent years. While there have been prior studies on Soviet atheism, also in English, Victoria Smolkin's *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* promises to be a new standard work.[48] The state atheism of the Soviet Union, a very different 20th-century path for atheism than it took in Western Europe or the US, represents a key case in the history of atheism. And in a nuanced but exciting monograph, based on extensive archival work, Smolkin succeeds in retelling this long and very complex story.

The state communism in the Soviet Union is often perceived as a political or *Ersatz* religion. This is not least the case for thinkers wanting to disassociate the communist experience in the USSR from rational secularism. Hence, Mitchell Stephens, discussed in the introduction, writes that "Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot *were* in a sense religious" (thus enabling him to handily exempt these communist dictators from his story of good atheism).[49] In another recent book on atheism, British philosopher John Gray claims that Bolshevism was religious in that it served as a channel for the "millenarian myths of apocalyptic Christianity."[50] Applying the categories of traditional religion to (totalitarian) politics may certainly be a valid analysis, but it also risks remaining a rather crude portrayal of certain political experiences and historical developments. In the case of the USSR and atheism, it is much more interesting to see what actually went on in the godless superpower, how the leaders of party and state sought to disband, replace, or refocus traditional religion, and what this meant for the development of Soviet society. This is what Smolkin has done in her work.

The goal was clear: an atheist society where traditional religion – perceived as an enemy to communism – was to disappear. However, the intensity and methods of this project varied greatly throughout the some 80 years that the Soviet Union existed. Without discussing this in any detail here, we may note a couple of shifts.

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47 Devellennes, *Positive Atheism*, 201–209.

48 See, for instance, Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

49 Stephens, *Imagine There's No Heaven*, 221.

50 John Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism* (London: Allen Lane, 2018), 72. Gray here bases his account on thinkers such as Eric Voegelin and Norman Cohn.

With a nod toward Devellennes' work discussed above, we may say that one development was the shift from negative to positive atheism. Earlier persecutions of Christians, destruction of churches, and rational debunking of superstitious beliefs in the name of science proved insufficient. The people still believed not only in Lenin and Khrushchev, it turned out, but also in God, and in the homes of ordinary people, the party program was placed next to prayer books.[51] Therefore, during the post-war era, there were conscious efforts from the state to replace religion by trying to fulfill spiritual needs, thus taking control over the Soviet soul. Communicating a communist worldview and ethics represented one tool in this project; another was the expansion of socialist rituals connected to important events in human life, such as weddings and funerals.[52]

Smolkin's book will become important in Soviet historiography. In this context, however, it is more interesting to note its relationship to the historiography of atheism and secularism. Atheism in the Soviet Union played an important part in 20th-century atheism in general, also in Western countries – an inspiration for some, but a threat to or a big Other for most.[53] Shifts in Soviet atheism may thus mean shifts in religious and atheist identity in other societies. This is certainly true in the case of the US, and Smolkin relates to the "cultural war" of the Cold War. This warfare, for instance, led cosmonauts and astronauts to discuss theological matters (German Titov did not see God in space, he proudly declared, while John Glenn claimed that his God was not of the kind you could see from a spaceship).[54]

It is also interesting to note some similarities to the Western hemisphere during the Cold War. First, the belief in, and connection of atheism to, science represented a backbone also in Soviet atheism. Here, the non-believing cosmonauts were heroes, promoting the proud scientific and technological advances of the atheist state.[55] Second, the "return of religion" to public life in the late 20th century was also noted in the Soviet Union. However, the background for this phenomenon was different. If Western Europe first experienced a "religious crisis" in the 1960s and 1970s, when especially the youth lost faith in traditional religion, an inverted

51 Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018), 83.

52 Smolkin, *A Sacred Space*, 165–193.

53 The impact and legacy of Soviet atheism are still noticeable in Finland and the Baltic states, see Teemu Taira, Atko Remmel, and Anton Jansson, "The Nordic and Baltic Countries," in *The Cambridge History of Atheism*, ed. Michael Ruse and Stephen Bullivant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

54 Smolkin, *A Sacred Space*, 84–85.

55 See especially Chapter 3 in Smolkin, *A Sacred Space.*

development took place in the USSR. Youth and intelligentsia about this time seemed to turn to religion. This could thus be seen as opposite to the development in the West but also a parallel: if the religious crisis in the West signaled dissatisfaction with the establishment of the older generations, similarly the turn *to* religiosity in the Soviet Union was a turn away from the establishment, an "opposition to the socialist way of life" or even "inner migration."[56] This serves as an additional example of how national and political contexts matter in the development of belief and non-belief.

So, atheism was an integral part of the social and political history of the globally vastly important Soviet state. Another example of this is how Smolkin reads the demise of the Soviet Union through atheism. In the 1980s, the state under Gorbachev increasingly came to accept the Russian Orthodox Church and its representatives. This was, in a sense, a break from atheism, which signaled the end of the ideological coherence between official party ideology and state practice. Such inconsistencies meant that the monopoly of truth was put into question, thus resulting in the moral authority and political legitimacy of the Soviet rulers crumbling.[57] This is an interesting example of how atheism may play a role also in social and political issues going beyond the mere question of the existence of God and the role of religious institutions.

Conclusion: Trends and Future Directions

It may be hard to discern *one* common trend in the historiography of atheism, freethought, etc. based on the seven books discussed here. Nevertheless, some things can be noted. Many of these works in a very fruitful way move in the borderlands between intellectual, social, and political history. Ideas are circulating in social movements, as we see in the works of Alexander and Weldon, are promoted in state policy, as in Smolkin's work, move in broader historical shifts, as in Ryrie's work, or take shape in relation to gender politics, as made clear in Hamlin's work. The importance of canonized thinkers – Spinoza, Diderot, Paine, Marx, Nietzsche, Darwin, and others – is duly noted as significant, but their texts are not necessarily analyzed in depth.[58] The materials used also mirror this: the au-

56 Smolkin, *A Sacred Space*, 225–226; Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

57 Smolkin, *A Sacred Space*, 228–246

58 There may be exceptions. One recent work that could have been included even though the author does not directly relate it to this field is Frederick C. Beiser, *David Friedrich Strauss, Father of Unbelief: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

thors here have not shied away from using a wide assortment of sources. Philosophical and scientific works, yes, but also periodicals, newspapers, archival material of various kinds, correspondence, novels, autobiographies, and, in Smolkin's case, interviews. This mirrors the broader history of atheist ideas in movements, in contexts, and in circulation. This represents a constructive way of writing this history. As we have seen, social and political contexts matter a great deal for the various ways in which atheism and secularism take shape.

As mentioned at the outset, research on the history of atheism has often lent itself to partisan narratives exhibiting hagiographic or speculative tendencies. While there are surely also current researchers who are motivated by their personal belief or non-belief and engagements in corresponding organizations, the historiography considered here is nuanced and well-grounded, rather than serving as identity formation dressed up in academic garb. To produce a tenable historical understanding, the historiography of atheism cannot be too one-sided. This also means that those who research non-believers and the turning away from religion need to be knowledgeable regarding religious contexts and consider them in their analysis. First, this is because doubt and humanism may grow out of religious traditions, as made clear in the works of Ryrie and Weldon. Second, and more importantly, due to the fact that religion is a clear opponent to most atheists and freethinkers, religion is productive in the history of the latter. All religious traditions are to some extent malleable, and an understanding of the particular position and ideals of the dominant religion or religions in a given context helps explain the motivations and specific engagements of atheists. What did they specifically dissent from or criticize? Was this the same as in other national contexts?

US history is an outlier when it comes to religious identity in the 20th century, and its specific Christian experience needs to be taken into account if we are to understand how and why unbelief in the US differs from, say, Scandinavian unbelief.[59] Weldon, for instance, to some extent contextualizes his story about humanism with the broader religious history of the US and how shifts in Christianity are related to developments in humanism. Generally, however, theological and church-historical aspects could be strengthened in works in this field. In various ways, modern secularism and modern Christianity are mutually constitutive. One example of this is highlighted by Todd Weir, mentioned in the introduction. He has re-

59 The United States has always been an anomaly for those advocating the correlation between modernity and secularization, being a society much more infused and dominated by religious beliefs – primarily Christianity –than otherwise similar richer, "modern" Western European countries. For a discussion on this and how this nevertheless seems to be changing, see David E. Campbell, Geoffrey C. Layman, and John C. Green, *Secular Surge: A New Fault Line in American Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

cently written about how Christians and secularists in interwar Germany were involved in a cultural war, where they in their "apologetics" shared the stage and therefore learned a lot from one another.[60]

There are recurring themes in these books. Science is hard to avoid when studying the history of atheism, but its centrality here is certainly related to developments in the 21st century. New Atheism was science-based, and this in a way perceived by many as crude and ahistorical. In this historiography, we can thus discern a wish to better understand science and atheism in context. Race is key for Alexander and Cameron and also occurs in the works by Weldon and Hamlin. Here, it is easy to see the echoes of contemporary US politics where this is a defining issue, not least in the 21st century. In this sense, while these works are not part of some partisan debate, they do reflect contemporary concerns.[61] This is obviously not something that should surprise us. As Jacob Burckhardt put it, history is "the record of what one age finds worthy of note in another."[62] Apart from this, we may note how one of the most dynamic "turns" in historical research in recent times, the history of emotions, has also found its way into the field, in Ryrie's work.

There is also a potential in the research in this field to join forces with another growing research field, namely history of knowledge, where this yearbook serves as a central arena and important exponent. The characterization of how the intellectual and social history of non-belief is currently written rhymes well with the dynamic, contextual, and cultural understanding of knowledge proposed by historians of knowledge.[63] There are more specific aspects where synergies could be found. As discussed above, the dichotomies of science vs religion and belief vs knowledge have been crucial in the history of freethought and atheism, as have knowledge-related concepts such as doubt, which is the focus of Ryrie's work. And while historians of science and knowledge have done much to debunk

60 Todd H. Weir, "The Apologetics of Modern Culture Wars: The Case of Weimar Germany," in *Defending the Faith: Global Histories of Apologetics and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Todd H. Weir and Hugh McLeod (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

61 Science is notable also outside these particular books. Apart from it being central to Weldon and important for Smolkin, Alexander, and to some degree Hamlin, it is the focus of attention also in Thomas, *Science and Religion in India*; Spenninger, *Stoff für Konflikt.* Race is central to Corbeil, *Empire and Progress.*

62 Jacob Burckhardt, *Judgments on History and Historians* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 168. The German original reads: "Sie ist der jedesmalige Bericht dessen, was Ein Zeitalter am andern Zeitalter merkwürdig findet." Jacob Burckhardt, *Historische Fragmente: aus dem Nachlass gesammelt von Emil Dürr mit einem Vorwort von Werner Kaegi* (Stuttgart: K. F. Koehler Verlag, 1957), 198.

63 For a presentation with further references, see the introductory text of this journal from 2022: Charlotte A. Lerg, Johan Östling, and Jana Weiß, "Introducing the Yearbook History of Intellectual Culture," *History of Intellectual Culture* 1 (2022).

these as eternal categories of conflict, it is clear that in certain instances, religious belief and certain types of knowledge claims have come into conflict and that these have been important for the identity and practice of various non-believing communities. This could then illustrate the historically shifting roles and contentions of knowledge as well as how knowledge intersects with identity and belief. Within these communities, there are also plenty of actors and arenas of knowledge that have been instrumental in the circulation of certain types of knowledge, not least shown in Stephen Weldon's work. Connecting with this field could thus be of interest to historians of knowledge interested in circulating practices, while historians of atheism, secularism, and humanism could benefit from theoretical tools such as knowledge actors, public arenas of knowledge, and circulation.[64] More at a meta level, furthermore, the relatively sudden turn from social sciences dominated by secularization theory to the post-secular where religion quickly returned to scholarship around the turn of the 21st century could in itself be of interest for historians of knowledge, specializing in modern academic knowledge production.[65] These are just a couple of suggestions for how these fields could benefit from interactions and collaborations.

A positive development is that quite a few of these works have moved into the 20th century. It is safe to say that the historiography of atheism and freethought has focused on the 19th century, which is not surprising given the golden age of freethought and how many new strands of materialist and naturalist thinking came into existence at that time.[66] However, to historicize the 20th century and

64 See, for instance, Johan Östling, "Circulation, Arenas, and the Quest for Public Knowledge: Historiographical Currents and Analytical Frameworks," *History and Theory* 59, no. 4 (2020); Johan Östling, "Circulating Knowledge in Public Arenas: Toward a New History of the Postwar Humanities," *History of Humanities* 6, no. 2 (2021).

65 A point of departure in José Casanova's classic *Public Religions in the Modern World* was that he had noticed a dramatic paradigm shift: his colleagues were in the process of abandoning a previous paradigm dominated by the secularization theory "with the same uncritical haste with which they previously embraced it." Casanova, *Public Religions*, 11. Secularization theory and what many have seen as a secularist domination of mid-19th-century scholarship could thus also be an object for empirical studies by historians of knowledge. For an attempt focused on Sweden, see Anton Jansson, "The City, the Church, and the 1960s: On Secularization Theory and the Swedish Translation of Harvey Cox's *The Secular City*," in *Histories of Knowledge in Postwar Scandinavia: Actors, Arenas, and Aspirations*, ed. Johan Östling, Niklas Olsen, and David Larsson Heidenblad (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

66 A typical 19th-century work not mentioned thus far is Michael Rectenwald, *Nineteenth-Century British Secularism: Science, Religion, and Literature* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016). Of course, even though they are clearly fewer, there have been some works focusing on the 20th century. Apart from the above-mentioned volume edited by De Nutte and Gasenbeek, see, for instance,

try to note breaks and continuities with the preceding and following centuries is an important task and one where I think we will see more dynamic work in the future. The research of Smolkin, Weldon, and Cameron may here inspire and assist.

Further, these works bear witness to a curious situation facing current scholarship: the fact that English is both the dominant common language of the international research community and the native and particular research language for some scholars. The specific interests of the latter then naturally take up more space in what is also an international field. All scholars discussed here are based in the US and the UK, and while there are works on France and the USSR, the majority cover Anglo-American history. The selection of books here is obviously my own, but it reflects a strong tendency that English-language monographs on the history of atheism primarily tend to focus on North America and the UK. As noted in the beginning, the case here is rather that there are more books on these areas that could have been included.

In one sense, this is natural, but the international research community could also gain from more in-depth stories concerning other countries and language areas, not least since the United States is no default case in the history of religion and secularism. We non-English-language scholars should work toward this, but it is also something that academic publishers and editors should consider. In the meantime, we could also revel in the fact that there are great edited volumes in which fascinating national and sometimes even entangled cases flower, such as *Freethinkers in Europe* (edited by Carolin Kosuch), *Freethought and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe* (Bubík, Remmel, and Vaclavík), or *Looking Back to Look Forward* (De Nutte and Gasenbeek).[67] In these works, other European, and mostly Christian, countries come to the fore, but more works relating to non-Christian and non-European traditions are also needed.[68] All in all, works on other national cases as well as comparative, entangled, and global histories are something to hope for in the future.

Tina Block, *The Secular Northwest: Religion and Irreligion in Everyday Postwar Life* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016).

67 Kosuch, *Freethinkers*; Bubík, Remmel, and Václavík, *Freethought and Atheism*; De Nutte and Gasenbeek, *Looking Back.*

68 *The Cambridge History of Atheism* contains good chapters on atheism in non-Christian and non-Western settings, but there are fewer recent monographs with a clear historical perspective. One work touching on the history of atheism that is worth mentioning is Thomas, *Science and Religion in India.* For a work that is a few years older and with partly but not solely a historical angle, see Johannes Quack, *Disenchanting India: Organized Rationalism and Criticism of Religion in India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Initially, I raised the question of whether all works on the history of atheism and freethought necessarily belong to the same research field. We have here seen that these works focus on quite different parts of history. However, there are also many parallels, both expected and unexpected. The peripheral 18th-century atheist priest Jean Meslier, one of Devellennes' main characters, was erected as a statue in the Soviet Union, while German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach not only inspired Karl Marx's critique of religion but was also read by black freethinkers, such as Frederick Douglass and Zora Neale Hurston, as pointed out by Christopher Cameron.[69] Emotions were tied into belief and unbelief not only in the 16th century but also in the 20th century. So, historians working on atheism in one century and on one continent may still learn from reading and communicating with researchers working on completely different eras and locations. The existence of differences is obviously a necessary component for constructive comparisons, which help getting a better understanding of one's own case and context.

However, we have also seen how these works speak to other research fields and other historical phenomena than the ones discussed here. And it is my conviction that histories of freethought, atheism, secularism, and humanism could benefit research on other topics. As discussions on the "return of religion" in recent decades have made clear, questions of belief and non-belief represent a permanent and active part also in modern societies. The works mentioned here may bring something to the historical study of race, philosophy, knowledge, and science as well as to the wider history of religion and politics. Seeking out ways to contribute to this also represents one of the most interesting challenges to experts in this lively and interesting field.

About the contributor

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69 Cameron, *Black Freethinkers*, 33, 55.