

RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Argument for *Unbelief*: A Discussion about Terminology

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The rupture with traditional religion and the loss of belief in God as a widespread religious position represents a sea change in Western thought. However, there were very few self-declared atheists, secularists, and humanists in Western history prior to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and even during the Modern period, there are not many. This is especially true in my own research of nineteenth and early twentieth-century France. Those who took the name of *atheist* such as Baron d’Holbach or Jacques-André Naigeon were exceptional militants. The quest to find other such atheists buried in the pages and hidden messages of key books is a limited endeavor. Atheism as a concept does not originate from any single creed or doctrine and is itself open to permutation. Looking for a clear and distinct form of atheism is looking for a conceptual phenomenon constructed by the researcher. The language and words we use control and direct how we understand the past. The term “atheist” imposes a rigidity to a fluid and shifting phenomenon. Instead, we should open up our research to the emergence of modern “unbelief,” as defined by Gordon Stein and Tom Flynn in *The Encyclopedia of Unbelief*. This paper will argue for “unbelief” as the proper analytical category as a field of future research that will allow for a much larger, more inclusive, variegated set of parameters to understand the rupture with traditional forms of religion or spiritual practices. The important change in intellectual history was not the emergence of a particular atheism that promoted scientism and which held to its positions dogmatically but the acute doubt of past intellectual and religious traditions that led to a spectrum of new ideologies and religious positions.

An Argument for *Unbelief*

The emergence of widespread unbelief in Europe during the modern period is a watershed event in the history of human consciousness. For the first time, significant numbers of people in the cultural capitals of Western civilization turned away from religion and spirituality. However, despite the historical importance of this cultural shift, scholars have for a long-time neglected to treat it in their work, and it is only recently that a host of books, articles, and blog posts have been published on the subject. In these new studies, a small, but significant issue has come up: a lack of consensus on the proper term for what has been called atheism, secularism, or irreligion, among others. In the confusion of terminology, it is my contention that the decline of traditional religion merits a term that is both exhaustive but adequately specific. This article is a proposal to call the subject of this research *unbelief* versus *atheism*, the *secular*, or *irreligion*. “Unbelief” provides the most open conceptual flexibility without mischaracterizing the person or group into a predefined religious position. This is not an article that wishes to provide nuance to all forms of unbelief; rather I hope to suggest a more open category that captures the richness of the field.

An umbrella term for the field is not only useful but is essential because the current terms are often inaccurate in describing the nuance of changing religious beliefs and positions. *Atheism* sets up a false dichotomy that excludes the middle: one is a believer or not a believer. It assumes everything fits into two categories. Unbelief exists on a spectrum that includes the complication of the supernatural or intangible beliefs in things like progress, or unverifiable phenomena (spirituality, aliens, ghosts, spirits, ancestors, etc). Second, and central to the use of historical categories, if one looked only for those who called themselves “atheists,” the study would indubitably leave out a vast number of people who closely fit the description of atheist but never took the name, and just as importantly, those who were clearly not atheists but were far from traditional religion. The study of atheism and the process of the loss of faith must look at those who rejected established religion and entered into irreligion. Atheism as a cultural phenomenon lives and breathes in the activity of irreligion. Irreligion being that which challenges, refutes, and doubts religion and the religious. An atheist is a result of irreligion and can be understood to fit under a growing culture of unbelief.

I propose the term “unbelief” particularly in opposition to how the *Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (2013) and the *Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (2007) editions use “atheism” in their titles as the umbrella term for the study

of unbelief and the rejection of God (Bullivant and Ruse 2013; Martin 2007). While these two works are invaluable as a collection of excellent research and discussion, “atheism,” as a term to cover all that is asked of it, is too unclear and narrow, but also too political and too partisan. Scholarship needs a category that has the virtue of being more inclusive that can comprise the diversity encountered in the history of the ideas and practices that challenged religion and spirituality.

I propose the definition given by Gordon Stein and Tom Flynn found in the editions of *Encyclopedia of Unbelief* (1985) and *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief* (2007). In these works, “unbelief” is defined in a more open and inclusive way as the position of “not holding orthodox beliefs or traditional opinions—on religious matters” (Stein 1985, xv; Flynn 2007). Moreover, the term “unbelief” is heterodox in relation to traditional or dominant forms of religious expression or practices and is understood to be a term inside a historical context. It is a whole or partial break with traditional religion that includes blasphemy, heresy, the rejection of belief, atheism, agnosticism, humanism, and rationalism (Stein 1985). The term has its merits especially as a historical term that helps make the connections to the criticism, decline, or attenuation of belief in supernatural agents, religious ideas, and religious practices. Unbelief thus conceived can include various forms of spirituality and heresies which represent the incremental steps that took people further and further from normative belief in religion, spiritual practices, and the existence of God. The openness and inclusion of “unbelief” is its virtue.

To encapsulate all the above, Stein’s definition should be restated: unbelief is the position of not holding orthodox beliefs or traditional opinions—on religious matters—and the rejection of authority and norms concerning spiritual practices.

This definition accepts a substantive concept of religion that it is analytically useful in the study of history. In contrast to the social constructionist criticism of “religion” in recent years, the term “unbelief” maintains “religion” to be an analytical, useful historical category that is a tangible phenomenon distinguishable from the secular. Social constructionist theorists of religion in religious studies and anthropology, notably Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1962), Balagangadhara (1994), Jonathan Z. Smith (1998), Timothy Fitzgerald (2001), Russell McCutcheon (2001), and Daniel Dubuisson (2003), assert that “religion” is a Western construct invented in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for demarcating European modern and rationalist traditions from the traditions of non-Europeans, which Europeans considered backward and superstitious. In this evaluation, Europeans labelled themselves “secular” and non-Europeans “religious.” Thus, the religious/secular binary justified colonialism and became an integral part of Western ideology.

Further, the social constructionists argue that religion is a problematic concept for other reasons. Timothy Fitzgerald holds that not only is “religion” an invented construct deployed for self-serving purposes, but that once the concept of religion is analyzed, religious thinking cannot be satisfactorily distinguished from non-religious thinking.

Likewise, Fitzgerald holds that the functional understanding of “religion” renders the concept indistinguishable from culture. Thus, the concept of religion has little to no analytical or descriptive value (Fitzgerald 1997; Fitzgerald 2007).

In Fitzgerald’s point of view, the inseparable nature of the secular and religious leads some scholars to explore functional ideas of religion that equate ideology with religion since both can provide an ultimate meaning to life (2000). Functional definitions of religion have their intellectual origin in Emile Durkheim and Paul Tillich’s work. Durkheim defined religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (2008, 47). Tillich defined religion as “the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of life” (1963, 3) Both definitions provide a functional understanding of religion. Durkheim stated that religion designated sacred symbols and helped unify and hold together the community. For example, the tricolor flag is the sacred symbol of French revolutionaries and serves to unify the community symbolically; in addition, the French community is reinforced through mass public republican rituals such as parades, inaugurations, the dedication of deceased secular heroes to the Pantheon in Paris, etc. When French republicanism is functionally compared to the processions, dedications, and sainthood rituals of Catholicism, republicanism and Catholicism appear very similar. Additionally, Fitzgerald argues that such notions as “religious experience” lose their analytical value under investigation (2000). For instance, meditative practices such as fly-fishing or morning walks can be given the connotation of a religious experience.

Taking these problems in consideration, Kevin Schilbrack (2012) argues that the term “religion” is not irredeemable. First, the solution is to limit or avoid the use of functional theories of religion. One should instead use substantive definitions. Second, Schilbrack contends that while it is perhaps not possible to separate the categories “culture” and “religion,” one can usefully distinguish different aspects from one another. “Religion” when substantively defined can be usefully distinguished from the secular and culture. Following this logic, “unbelief” is a referent that is moving away from a practice or a belief in a culture that can be substantively and analytically identified as “religion” that is useful, if not essential, for the historian to recognize. Substantively, unbelief points to important historical practices/beliefs that are being modified, rejected, or denigrated.

“Unbelief” uses a substantive definition of religion to distinguish “religion” as a social and cultural phenomenon from the secular and irreligious that exists on a spectrum with religion and spiritual practice on one end and materialism and atheism on the other. While the function of ideology and religion may be similar, their substantive claims are different. Rather than dive into a prolonged discussion about the category of religion, it is the requirement of each scholar to provide with detail what is understood as religion to which unbelievers are

responding. Schilbrack argues “that ‘religion’ is a socially constructed concept, analytically and descriptively useful for some purposes [that] cannot be studied without at least certain norms held at least implicitly by the scholar,” but remains a real and valuable category (2012, 115). He argues, in short, that religion is a useful analytical category with limitations built in that can point to substantive differences, as for example, between a temple and a post office building.

The problems of “religion” aside, the term “unbelief” is not without critics. In the *Dictionary of Atheism, Skepticism, & Humanism* (2006), Bill Cooke takes a hard stance against the use of “unbelief.” Cooke contends that “unbelief” gives theists the higher ground. Cooke says that the term “defines itself as a negative other to religious belief, and seems to concede to religious belief the status of being the norm” (2006, 545). Further, “unbeliever” is defined by Cooke as a derogatory term that defines people by what they do not believe, implicitly attaching the stigma of someone who lacks conviction and scruples—that “people without religious belief **believe in nothing**” (his choice of bold). Thus, both nonbelief and unbelief would fall under this criticism. While Cooke provides thoughtful considerations, his argument against “unbelief” is grounded in his preference for the triumph of free thought and atheism. He makes his evaluative judgment known, rather than his support of impartial inquiry, when he says, “This dictionary exists as a standing reminder of the many noble things freethinkers believe.” (2006, 545) Historical understanding should not be clouded or sacrificed to partisan interests.

To his first criticism, that religious belief is taken to be the norm is entirely acceptable. Unbelief signifies the rupture with former practices and traditions in regard to religion, the supernatural, transcendence, and spiritual practices. What he sees as a fault is primary and useful for the historian to demonstrate the break with past norms. In addition, the merit of “unbelief” is that it references the disentanglement or removal of religious belief or practice in time. “Unbelief” is a term that places unbelievers in historical temporality. The “un” of “unbelief” ties it to historical references relevant to the particular culture in discussion. The very element that Cooke dislikes is one of the strongest points of the term. That “unbelief” is used in a derogatory manner by some religious believers is not truly a problem because the academic usage of the word is outside such evaluative judgements, which will, consequently, rehabilitate the term from the those who use it disparagingly.

In regard to thinking about other possible umbrella terms, “unbelief” is the most suitable term for several practical reasons. First, to the surprise of the non-specialist, there are many “atheisms”—a point not clear to those outside the field. Second, in studying unbelief, we document the incremental, partial ruptures with traditional religion or traditional spiritual practices; however, atheism is part of identity politics that overemphasizes a complete break. Third, because atheism is part of identity politics, it is overly partisan. Fourth, the label “atheist” suggests a religious confession that many subjects in the history of

unbelief never made. And last, the label “atheist” is biased towards Anglophone history.

To the first point, the term “atheism” is unclear and scholars have had to expand the definition of atheism to make it applicable to the diversity of unbelief. According to academic definitions, there are kinds and shades of atheism. Indeed, there are “atheisms.” J.C.A. Gaskin had argued in 1989 for “unbelief” for just this reason. Gaskin was careful to note that “atheism” had various meanings historically and had long been cast about as a term of abuse (1989). Because of its many uses Stephen Bullivant puts atheism in quotations in his chapter “Defining ‘Atheism,’” in the *Oxford Handbook of Atheism*. Bullivant, after providing five variations of how “atheism” has been used and understood, said very tentatively that the definition of “atheism” is a term “relating in a negative way, to a thing or things called ‘god.’” Bullivant then concedes that atheism “simply possesses no single objective definition” (2013, 12–13). He nonetheless believes it to be a useful term so long as it is carefully defined. However, this provides the difficulty of not knowing what kind of atheism we are referring to unless we go back to each individual text, sowing confusion each time the word “atheist” is used.

For example, early modern thinkers differentiated between “speculative atheism” and “practical atheism” to separate explicit disbelief (by conscious reflection) and implicit disbelief (by unconscionable action). Also, in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, Michael Martin follows Antony Flew’s definition that distinguishes between negative atheism (absence of belief in God) and positive atheism (disbelief in all Gods) (Martin 2007, 1–2). Similarly, scholars must differentiate atheism from agnosticism. These terms start to blend together however. Agnosticism, being the position of not knowing, is synonymous with negative/weak atheism (the absence of belief in God). Finally, there are other “atheisms” floating around in public usage, such as strong or weak atheism, or even hard and soft atheism. Just visit the popular online discussion forum [r/atheism](https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism) on reddit.com. Members give a litany of various chosen identities of unbelief that slide into the absurd: atheist, strong atheist, anti-theist, agnostic atheist, irreligious, secular humanist, nihilist, ex-theist, “I’m a none,” pastafarian, apatheist, dudeist, etc. Apparently, the politics of identity have descended into bathos.

The second problem is that “atheism” implies a *social* rupture and clean break with religion—a kind of identity politics—and not a partial or ambiguous rupture. To declare oneself an atheist is to engage in a ritual of public recanting from the normative group to join the camp of God-deniers. Thus, “atheism” is political and partisan and suggests a conceptual purity that is not represented in the testimony of all those who broke with their religious faith. In my studies of the process of the loss of faith, former Catholics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were reluctant to participate in such identity politics. Former priests during the Modernist Crisis in France such as Alfred Loisy, Albert Houtin, Marcel Hébert, or Joseph Turmel never took the label of “atheist.” They avoided it and used other terms (that could be just as imprecise). Some, such as Alfaric Prosper, Joseph Turmel,

and Jules Claraz, took the label of “freethinker.” Others, such as Marcel Hébert passed into an optimistic hope that God and an afterlife were real and possible while rejecting Christianity wholeheartedly and believing that society and history followed a path of universal spiritual development (Houtin 1925). In a similar case, an excommunicated priest, Charles Loyson, who broke with Catholicism in 1869, died in 1912 calling himself a “freebeliever” (Houtin 1924). There is a grey area to the loss of faith that resists categorization. Some convictions are at the intersections of belief and unbelief. I cannot call these individuals “atheists” without doing injustice to their individualism and nonconformity. Yet each one of them contributed greatly to challenging Christianity and organized religious belief in general.

Let’s take the example of the former priest Marcel Hébert further, who was pushed out of the Church when a private essay was exposed, *Souvenirs d’Assises*, which he had written to his former students in 1899. In this essay, all the principles of Christianity are understood as symbols of deeper human needs. Further, he expressed the causes of his doubts: the existence of evil, the weakness of the arguments for the existence of God, and the contradictions in the Gospels, especially the Resurrection. Hébert could be considered a negative atheist (because of his absence of belief in God). He maintained a position of agnosticism towards God and the afterlife. However, he affirmed that there was an eternal substance moving towards a greater harmony and had a quasi-religious belief in progress (Houtin 1925). What do we make of this last point? Shall we call him a mystical atheist, a freethinker, or a freebeliever? I suggest we call him an “unbeliever” for his heterodoxy and rupture with Christianity and leave the other labels alone.

There is a large middle zone to unbelief that overlaps with religious belief where people can of their own volition go back and forth see **Figure 1** below. The problem with conceptual categories is the hard line that excludes the middle—the *either/or*. For example, if we take the book *Crisis of Doubt* (2006) by Timothy Larsen, he details how unbelievers reconverted to Christianity as an argument for the importance of Christianity in Victorian Britain. In thinking about the people who reconverted, it is difficult to conceive of them intellectually going back and forth using only the term atheist and Christian. David Nash wrote a response to the *Crisis of Doubt* and he critiques Larsen for characterizing spiritual struggle in strong oppositional terms. Nash suggests we should think of rationalism and spirituality overlapping a great deal. In considering why someone like Annie Besant, a former star contributor to the National Secular Society, converted to Theosophy, Nash concludes that “historians have overstated a naturally assumed conflict between religious/New Age mysticism and rationalism. Rationalism is not, by default, the antithesis of religious or mystical thought requiring proof without belief” (Nash 2011, 80). Nash includes in his conclusion the ideas of Charles Taylor and Grace Davie. The latter looks at a middle category of people who no longer practice with an organized Church who “believe without belonging.” Nash also describes how Taylor in *A Secular Age* argues that belief has lost its roots and foundations and thus “individuals [are] reconstructing religious moral belief from the ground upwards, away from the gaze of religious institutions” (2011, 82). Spirituality has been unhinged from authority and ritual that hold it in place with the result that many people do not hold doctrinaire positions. The term “atheist” does not capture this free roaming of ideas as well as the term “unbelief” does.

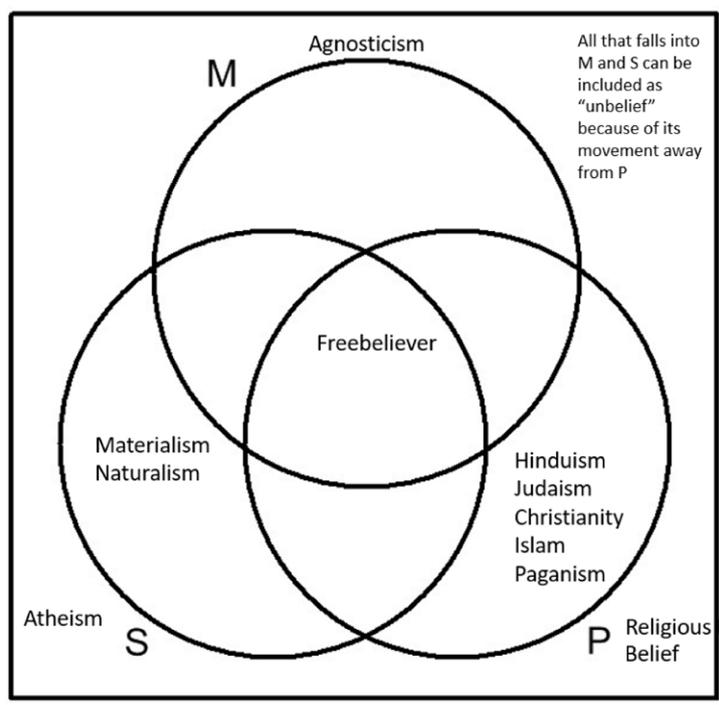


Figure 1: Venn Diagram of Unbelief: Religious belief and atheism should be seen as existing on a spectrum that includes many overlapping ideas and doubts. Through the process of personal growth people drift between them.

Most of the terms possible for unbelief are burdened with their particular socio-historical context. Ancient Rome and Christianity had instilled in their governing structure the idea that religion held the social unit together; thus, those who refused to practice betrayed the standards and morals of the community. For Romans, respecting religious practice demonstrated civic loyalty—an atheist was a traitor. Likewise, in the book of Psalms 14:1 in the Bible, the Christians adopted the Jewish judgement that associated unbelief with a “fool” who says “there is no God. They are corrupt; they do abominable deeds; there is none who does good.” They were considered practical atheists, who behaved as if they did not believe in divine judgment. This traditional connection of atheism with immorality has led to nineteenth-century atheists such as Charles Bradlaugh, desiring to rehabilitate the term “atheist” (Gaskin 1989). The term is thus loaded with a moral and social agenda of particular political groups, giving a militant connotation to the word.

The identity politics of declaring oneself an atheist, and the desire to avoid the label, has created an assortment of alternatives that became political expressions. The other labels, “rationalist,” “secularist,” “freethinker,” or “humanist” are strongly linked with particular groups and publications. These terms have become flags around which to rally the troops to action and organization. Tom Flynn lists this as one of the primary reasons he favors “unbelief” in the *New Encyclopedia of Unbelief* (2010 and 2016). The label “atheist” is partisan, but so are many of the other terms. The term “unbelief” allows a mostly neutral category, unclaimed by a particular movement. For instance, in the United States, “atheism” is associated with American Atheists and their self-published popular magazine. We also have American Humanism and the Secular Student Alliance, each of which is supporting an irreligious social and political movement. In Britain, there is the National Secular Society. The word “unbelief” avoids pointing to a particular social movement or publication.

Fourth, and perhaps the most important, when we assess whether someone was an atheist, we run the risk of imposing a construct onto the subject of our study. Are historians reifying a category and pretending to make it more real and expressed than it actually was? In the search for the origins of atheism, there have been many valuable and worthwhile attempts to identify the first atheist. But the historian has forced a modern construct on to a pre-modern subject. For example, in looking for atheism, we have gone back to Lucretius and Epicurus, but the Epicureans believed that gods existed. They claimed the gods simply did not concern themselves with the pettiness of human affairs; consequently, they built their philosophy around the notion that the gods were irrelevant. The Epicureans held heterodox beliefs but were not strict atheists. Gaskin includes them in his survey as an expression of “social unbelief” (1989). Epicureans were without dispute an important cultural formation of unbelief since they rejected the conventional notions of traditional religion. “Unbelief” has the virtue of not conflating their rejection of convention with godlessness or misrepresenting their claims.

In what has become a classic text in the study of the history of unbelief, Lucien Febvre addressed the problem stated above. Febvre had given the impression in his work *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century* (1942) that modern atheism could not be found in the Early Modern period because the intellectual tools necessary had not yet been fully expressed or created. To the point that atheism did not exist in the Early Modern period, Febvre himself knew that it had existed in proto-type form but not in its fully articulated modern form because the language of science and rationalism were then too limited. Alan Kors, David Wootton, and Michael Hunter have all noted in fact that Febvre did not sufficiently consider how the idea and creation of atheism had been articulated through Christians themselves (Kors 1990; Wootton 1988; Hunter 1985; Hunter and Wootton 1992). In their passionate defense of God, Christians spelled out and articulated atheist arguments in order to refute them. For instance, Wootton notes that Montaigne, Pascal, Brown, and Bayle had presented arguments for and against unbelief in the Early Modern period (1988).

Yet Febvre’s work provides a useful case study that demonstrates the problem of using the label “atheist” for ambiguous figures such as Francois Rabelais. Febvre’s central question was whether it was appropriate to assume that Rabelais, the great French Renaissance writer best known for his biting satirical work, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, was a covert atheist, although he had never admitted to being one. Febvre’s work began as a reaction to another historian, Abel Lefranc, who wrote an introduction to a 1922 critical edition of *Oeuvres de François Rabelais* that contained the story *Pantagruel*. Lefranc claimed that Rabelais was a rationalist and an unbeliever who sought to undermine Christianity. Febvre critiqued Lefranc, saying it was anachronistic to look for modern forms of rejection of God in sixteenth-century France. Yes, Febvre said, Rabelais mocked religion, dragged it through the mud, and questioned it in ways that many religious thinkers of the time had also questioned it. However, rather than being an atheist, Rabelais fit into the literary culture of his period that lambasted and mocked religion as a common practice. Febvre suggested that in the hope of finding atheism, Lefranc had taken his modern form of unbelief and imposed it upon Rabelais’s early modern form of unbelief, turning Rabelais into something like a pure ideological atheist. A central criticism of Febvre’s was that Lefranc used a language inappropriate for the historical period. Lefranc’s language imposed a structure and a cultural attitude that was the invention of the scholar. Rabelais might have had held many doubts that took the form of mocking religion, and he enriched the culture of unbelief by writing brilliantly and humorously about religion—but to argue he was promoting atheism is to go too far (Febvre 1985).

In sum, using the word “atheism” when examining pre-modern and modern history can create a kind of fiction in the archives. Instead, we should use concepts that are calibrated to the context. The term “unbelief” permits this flexibility. “Unbelief” holds a place for heterodoxy that does not preclude spirituality, helps avoid anachronistic implications, and accounts for the overlapping middle ground found in modern spirituality.

Another problem with “atheism” is that it is rather narrowly Anglo-American. By contrast, it rarely appears in nineteenth century-France under that name. “Atheist,” “secularist,” “agnostic,” and “humanist” are irreligious labels associated with Anglophone history. For example, George Holyoake coined the word “secularist” in 1851 because he no longer wanted to be called an atheist, who was someone understood to be without God and without good morals. Later in the century, Thomas Huxley coined the word “agnostic” in 1869. In comparison, the term atheist was not championed in France in the same way as it was in Britain as part of an organized social movement. In France, unbelievers preferred to call themselves “*libre penseurs*” (“freethinkers”). Yet, in England, the label “atheist” was taken up by Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant in the context of their campaigning for the National Secular Society. They proudly called themselves atheists and tried to convert others to atheism. To call oneself an atheist was to be part of a proud tradition for unbelievers in the Anglophone world.

This leads back to point four: in France, few took the label of “atheist.” During the eighteenth century, atheist materialism only included a handful of people such as Baron D’Holback, Diderot, Jacques-André Naigeon, La Mettrie, and Helvétius. In the French Revolution, republican anticlericalism and deism were the two most important irreligious movements. In the first half of the nineteenth century, there was no comparable social movement of people declaring themselves atheists. Instead, people became followers of Fourier, Saint-Simon, or August Comte. They were Fourierists, Saint-Simonians, or positivists. Their theories were effectively atheistic. However, adherents considered themselves followers of the founders, not atheists. If we tried to label them “atheists,” we would begin to impose a conceptual category upon them that was not clearly the case. We can more easily say that Fourier, Saint-Simon, and Comte were a part of the culture of unbelief.

Also, the freethinkers of the nineteenth century did not necessarily adopt the identity of atheist, secularist, or humanist. Freethinkers were a brand of unbeliever that contained a great deal of variety. Freethought lacked doctrinal purity and instead united unbelievers through anticlericalism. For example, freethought in France was divided for a time between deists and atheists (Lalouette 1997). Further, some French unbelievers still lingered in an assortment of spiritualist and supernatural beliefs that flourished in Freemason organizations. Emile Combes, a Freemason and the great anticlerical politician who initiated the Separation of Church and State in France in 1905, believed that there was a progressive moral force governing history. One of his strongest convictions was that this moral force progressed through the struggle and marginalization of Catholicism. He was an unbeliever, a person of heterodox beliefs, but certainly not a pure atheist (Combes 1956).

It can be argued that atheism has arrived in the nineteenth and twentieth century fully formed with books, organizations, slogans, and their own leaders at the head of social movements. Clearly then, one could argue,

atheism should be used in the modern period. Yes, it should, in looking for a very narrow subset of people. Narrow studies should continue to use terms such as “atheist,” “deist,” “agnostic,” and “skeptical.” However, if we use the term “atheist” we are not including modern giants in the history of unbelief such as Emile Combes. “Atheist” has the fault of suggesting doctrinal agreement to pure naturalism and materialism, while “unbeliever” leaves the problems of people’s nuanced and eccentric beliefs accounted for without mischaracterization.

Finally, there are other terms that can provide an umbrella term to studies of the decline and rejection of religion worth mentioning. “Secularity” is one candidate. However, it is problematic because secular has its origins in the particular tradition of the National Secular Society and George Holyoake in nineteenth-century Britain. Further, “secularity” has the disadvantage of not necessarily implying irreligion. For example, Jews and Protestants in France promoted a secular state and a secular political agenda because they wanted to overturn the political domination of Catholicism. In addition, the concept of the “secular” is often tossed about and confused with secularization theory (the idea of a universal causal process of the decline of religion with the advent of modernity). “Irreligion” is another candidate. However, it has the opposite problem in that it implies an antagonism or negation with religion that seems to erase the middle, the indifferent, or the spiritually ambiguous. “Unbelief,” because it has not been claimed by any particular group, remains open enough that it can include the transitional states of spirituality that challenged authority and convention. As for the term “freethought,” it provides a positive term without the baggage of the “non” or “un,” has the non-denigrating connotation of “free,” and provides ample ambiguity that can mix spiritual practice and irreligion. However, it was one of the most popular partisan labels used in the nineteenth century by French and British anticlerical irreligious groups that constituted a sociopolitical movement that reached its height in the 1880s in Britain and the early 1900s in France. The groups constituted a civil rights movement that had fought and won toleration and acceptance for unbelief in the public space. “Unbelief” does not share this cultural history and therefore remains more detached and neutral from political partisan struggles in the past.

“Disbelief” and “nonbelief” are also candidates. “Disbelief” and “nonbelief” are functional equivalents to “unbelief.” The chief reason of advocating unbelief is that it has acquired some momentum and usage already. Nonetheless, there are good reasons to choose “unbelief” over the others. While “disbelief” and “unbelief” both imply a negation, “disbelief” has the added sense of being unable to believe (for example: they stood in disbelief that someone stole their ramshackle car). “Unbelief” has the virtue of linking the social and intellectual changes moving away from religious belief (“un” being a removal). “Nonbelief” is also similar and a candidate; however, “nonbelief” has the connotation of not believing because of a lack of familiarity. Thus, nonbelief is better situated under the umbrella of unbelief than vice-versa. Again,

being that there is already momentum for unbelief with the publications of the two editions of the *Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, it makes sense to choose it over the others.

In conclusion, when we use the word “atheism,” it imposes a hard conceptual line that was often actually blurred and unclear. So when should the term atheist be used? I propose only when the subject of the study declared and identified themselves as such. To do otherwise is to impose a type of belief (and an ambiguous one) that they never confessed. The study of the decline of religion is larger than the concept of atheism. The history of the rupture and break with religion entails a vast gamut of irreligious and heterodox spiritual expressions that both overlap and run across a spectrum. As historians, we do the past a disservice by creating categories that do not reflect the period we study. To avoid imposing our ways of thinking upon the past, we need to be careful with the language we use. “Atheism” is a culturally loaded term. “Unbelief” is a more responsible category because its ambiguity allows a much greater degree of inclusion.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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